Three Long Mountains and a Wood

by Phoenix1966

Summary

Alpha Jensen was satisfied with his life. He ran a business with his fellow Navy buddy and lived in a part of the country that offered him almost everything he needed to be content.

Almost.

And then, one day, an unmated omega and his daughter walked into Jensen's pub.
Notes

This is for the infinitely generous and patient Casey679, who bid on me for a fanworks auction on LiveJournal benefiting Nyxocity. She wanted a protective Jensen/Dean noticing and trying to court poor-but-determined-to-be-self-reliant, good-single-dad Jared/Sam? I hope you like it and thank you for contributing!

While there is mention of past mpreg, there is no actual mpreg in the story.

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Jensen should have noticed the guy first. Dark, wild hair curling at the base of his neck and as tall as the pine trees Maine was known for, the stranger dwarfed Jensen by a couple of inches and he was no slouch in the height department. And there was a hint of warm sweetness that clung to him, like vanilla or coconut, which Jensen chalked up to his aftershave, because there was no way he was an omega; not with that height and those shoulders. Jensen might have been able to confirm it one way or another as the stranger walked past him, but he would never do that. Although some folks, mostly alphas, weren’t shy about scenting another, he was firmly rooted in the camp who thought it was rude and an invasion of privacy. They weren’t savages, after all, and there was no place for it in today’s culture. Given his line of work, however, Jensen did have access to a majority of his customers’ designations, thanks to their government-issued IDs, although he tried not to focus on them. So, despite the fact that the young guy had piqued his curiosity the moment he had walked through the doors of The Pitch & Roll Pub, he wasn’t the first thing that caught Jensen’s eye. It had been the bouncy, tiny brunette who held his hand that did.

West Bath had a population less than nineteen hundred, meaning strangers were easy to pick out, comprised mostly of the tourist crowd passing through to other towns for autumn leaf peeping or antiquing. The area of Winnegance, where the pub was located, didn’t have much in the way of antiques. There were mostly fishermen and the folks still employed by the Bath Iron Works, despite the reduction in workforce that had occurred a while back. Five years ago, Jensen had settled here and had poured a chunk of his savings into the pub. He was the proud – and silent – partner along with another Navy buddy of the relatively recently refurbished establishment. When Naval Air Station Brunswick had been a casualty of the BRAC campaign, Jensen had been in the middle of his second shore tour there and he decided to take it as a sign, too. He’d fallen in love with the area where though most of the inhabitants were of English descent, they’d had family in the region since the 1600s and liked to simply refer to themselves as Americans. Kim Rhodes, a beta who identified as alpha, had been dating one of the local deputies while she was serving at Brunswick and she had talked the place up so much, Jensen decided to stick around, too. The area and way of life appealed to Jensen, who had grown weary of conflict and wanted a measure of peace and the space to breathe. And he had found it in Winnegance, for the most part. Mountains and woods in his backyard when he needed to roam and the Atlantic in his front yard. The sea had gotten into his blood and he knew he couldn’t ever live where he didn’t hear its familiar roll and crash. This place seemed like the best of both worlds for him with the added benefit of not being too far from more “cosmopolitan” cities when he needed that kind of a fix. And he couldn’t have had a better business partner than Kim. She had been his ranking officer on his last tour and he admired her strength of character and resilience. Although there had been great strides in acceptance for trans individuals, it was by no means a cakewalk in the military or in civilian life. Couple that with the fact that she was openly involved with another alpha when alpha-alpha mateships and marriage were still considered taboo by a small portion of the country, since hard-core traditionalists argued there was no biological imperative in that kind of a pairing, she had her work cut out for her. That was part of the reason that Jensen accepted her offer to go in on the pub together but only if she would let him remain a silent partner. He didn’t want to be viewed as the de facto owner given that he was a cis alpha and somehow her superior. She’d fought him on it initially, saying that that was like giving in to stereotypes; she was fine with the fight. He argued back saying sometimes it was all right to take the path of least resistance and it would make him feel more comfortable with the situation. He reminded her his feelings mattered, too. They were probably going to have to deal with enough drunken idiots in the course of any given day, so why not preemptively smooth over as many potential blowups as possible?
They’d hemmed and hawed over it for a good, long while (“You know how stubborn us alphas are,” he had said, cuffed her on her shoulder) and finally agreed that Jensen would remain silent, which, she had snorted, would be a first for him. They renovated the two-story brick building, creating an apartment up above, and remodeled the bottom with a long, wooden bar running the length of the rectangular structure on the right and a series of booths along the left. Since the place had some historical significance, but no official recognition, they made sure to keep the exterior as close to original as possible, repairing structural issues only. However, the interior was all rich, honeyed wood with brass fixtures, nets, ropes and a couple of buoys along the wall, all skirting on the side of tasteful and avoiding anything too kitschy when they were finished. Besides the regional microbrews and oaky bourbons they made themselves known for, they decided to focus on local cuisines favoring seafood as well as burgers and a few other mainstays. Nothing too fancy, but filling with respectable portion sizes. DJ was a tremendous cook, surprising both Jensen and Kim when he’d come in answering the ad they’d placed in The Times Record. What was startling about the beta was that he was as skinny as a rail and, considering the delicious and very rich fare he could whip up at a moment’s notice, sometimes with very limited ingredients, someone might have thought he’d never even taken the time to taste his own cooking.

When he and Kim had decided on a work schedule, with him taking the evening shift behind the bar so that Kim could be on the same rotation as her partner, she had insisted he take the apartment and she’d find another place. He had teased her that with a serious, significant other he didn’t think she’d have to look too hard for a place to lay her head down. She’d smacked him hard and blushed red as a hydrant. But it worked for them. She handled the lunch crowd and he took over in the evenings, and they traded off weekends and holidays. Every once in a while, when things were especially smooth sailing between her and Briana, Kim would tell him he needed to find someone, too. He’d smile and polish another glass with his ever-present bar towel, but wouldn’t say much on the subject.

The downside to a small town was, obviously, a very small dating pool. And Jensen definitely had no intention of fouling where he ate. There were one or two people who he had considered as potential mates in the last, five years, but the longer he lived in Winnegance, the more he came to realize they made better friends than anything else. There were the occasional, “ships passing in the night” hookups he indulged in. Had to love the tourist crowd for the variety they presented. At an inch over six feet, a physique honed by years and years of regimented exercise, green eyes and a decent sense of humor, Jensen never lacked for interest. And every couple of months, Jensen would make the trek down to Boston, where he might meet up with one of his few “friends with benefits”. He was always safe and he never, ever knotted anyone. Before he left Texas for the last time to head off to naval aviation school in Pensacola, Jensen had knotted his best friend. They’d both known it was goodbye and it had been beautiful and intense and something he never forgot. And because of that strong connection and the subsequent void he’d ached over after, Jensen vowed to only knot whoever he finally mated and married, if he ever did. He had to protect his heart. So when tall, dark and mysterious had moseyed into his bar, he had definitely perked up. But once he got a gander at the little lady on the stranger’s arm, he was lost hook, line and sinker.

All of three feet tall, she had her daddy’s hair (because there was no way the stranger wasn’t her parent and that meant a pretty beta or omega somewhere in the picture, since only they could give birth). A brunette mop of out-of-control curls framed a pixie face with an upturned nose that was an exact copy of her sire’s. Dressed in clean, but worn, blue jeans and a purple shirt emblazoned with a yellow Pokémon (Jensen was very familiar with the current popularity of the now-virtual creatures. He and Kim had laughed their asses off the first, but not the last, time a tourist had tumbled in Winnegance Creek and trudged mournfully into the bar with a waterlogged iPhone), her round cheeks were pink from some obvious time in the sun. Her father wasn’t quite as stylish, with a couple of shirts layered on over his jeans, which looked genuinely ragged as opposed to fashionably ripped. Even if he hadn’t been a stranger, Jensen would have pegged him as a tourist dressed like
that, since they were usually over or underdressed for whatever season they passed through. His daughter giggled quietly at something her father told her, hiding her snickering behind a tiny fist and he smiled in return, stroking her hair affectionately. Jensen tried to appear like he wasn’t staring, despite his unexplainable fascination with the girl.

He liked children just fine; their town had a respectable amount of them and The Pitch & Roll had enough family appeal for the lunch crowd on the weekends that they saw their fair share, but there was something about the fey, little creature that inexplicably softened his heart. If Kim had been around, she would have teased him mercilessly about it, accusing him of really being an omega deep down inside. The endearing child’s parent led her over to one of the many, empty booths (Wednesdays were notoriously slow in the summer, which was one of the reasons Jensen had swapped with Kim when she had a rare chance to have a whole weekday off with Briana) as they were some of the only patrons that afternoon. He watched as the stranger hoisted her up and swung her around onto the tan, leather-covered, padded bench seat and she just about disappeared under the table. Her dad looked around sheepishly, which surprised Jensen because out-of-towners (especially alphas) were often very demanding. He cleared his throat and asked in a quiet voice, “Uh, do you have any booster seats?” And he didn’t meet Jensen’s eyes, acting almost deferential, which was definitely odd.

Jensen wrote off the behavior as politeness, which was always appreciated, grinned and rummaged around under the far end of the bar for the couple of boosters they had on hand, since the little lady was definitely too big for a highchair. “I think we can accommodate you,” he rumbled good-naturedly. “I’ll be right there,” he added before turning to his lone barfly. “You good, Doc?”

Holding up his mostly full bottle of Samuel Adams, he huffed, “Whaddya think, idjit?”

Jensen eyed Jim Beaver’s bottle and smirked, “I think I’m stuck with you for another hour at least. What did Steven do this time?”

Dr. Beaver snorted in his beer. “Don’t get me started. That damn alpha and his pig-headed ways.”

Jensen started to smile wider, knowing how the beta doctor and his alpha butted heads on a weekly basis, but noticed that the stranger had hunched up his shoulders slightly at the mention of “damn alpha” and decided not to egg Jim on like he normally did. Maybe the guy didn’t like to hear his gender disparaged and Jensen respected that. The stranger had no way of knowing about the love and respect that was the bedrock of Jim’s marriage to Steven, the only rabbi in their county. Both men seamlessly ministered to the needs of the community in different ways and were perfectly matched. That didn’t mean that they didn’t get into fantastic rows on a nearly weekly basis that usually ended up in such satisfying sex that Jim’s pheromones choked out anyone sitting on the stool next to him for at least a day or two afterward.

Jensen gave him a curt nod and snagged a couple of menus along with the seat as he walked around the end of the bar. When he got to their booth, he shot the dad a smile as he placed the menus in front of him and turned around to stretch across the table and plop the booster seat down beside the little girl. She squirmed over and tried to get herself situated, but couldn’t manage. Without thinking, Jensen grabbed her under her arms and hauled her carefully over into the seat. He didn’t let go until she was safely settled. Swiping her hand across her forehead, apparently trying to clear her bangs from her eyes and failing, she smiled brightly.

“Thank you, sir,” she chirped up at him in a clear and sweet voice.

“Anytime, little lady,” he replied. Turning to her father he added, “You’ve certainly got a well-mannered daughter there.” But instead of the proud expression he expected to find, the other man clenched his hands into fists like he was trying to restrain himself from lashing out. Jensen had come
across his share of territorial alphas in his day and admitted to himself he probably shouldn’t have manhandled the guy’s daughter without permission. But he was acting so protective that he almost came across as an omega, which made no sense. Even if, like Jensen practiced, no one tried to scent out another person’s gender, omegas had a tendency to “leak” theirs unless they were on suppressants. It was how Jensen knew that the girl was an omega, since she was too young for pharmaceutical intervention and had no ability to somewhat curtail her scent like she would eventually be able to as an adult. She smelled like peppermint candies.

“If you want us to leave,” the father said lowly, “we’ll go.”

“What?” Jensen blurted out, mystified that it had spun out of control that rapidly. “Why would you think that?” This guy was making no sense and then it dawned on him that maybe he thought Jensen was being a smart-ass or condescending about his omega child. Granted, omegas made up a smaller percentage of the population, but he was no bigot about it. That didn’t change the fact that a lot of people still were, and as the latest presidential race was starting to pick up steam, Jensen couldn’t deny the heated rhetoric between the Republican alpha, who was campaigning on an extremely traditional platform, and the Democratic, progressive, omega nominee had started to get nasty. This guy didn’t know any different with regards to Jensen, which is why he backpedaled right away.

Jensen held up his hands, palms outward. “Now why in the world would I want to chase off two perfectly good, paying customers? Especially one so pretty,” he added with a wink to the little girl, who had gotten tense as soon as her daddy had spoken up. She’d been picked on before, of that Jensen was certain, judging by the way she shrank down at the first sign of trouble.

Her father met Jensen’s gaze for the first time, his strangely colored eyes hiding behind hair as unruly as his daughter’s and Jensen had the odd desire to know exactly what color they were. He stared at Jensen and Jensen returned the gaze unflinchingly until the other man (a fairly young man, now that Jensen had a closer look) dropped his gaze.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I-I misunderstood you, I think.” He sucked his lower lip into his mouth and bit it to hold it in place. Jensen recognized the stress response and didn’t like it one bit.

“No need to apologize,” Jensen tried to smooth things over. “Now, since I know you two would be fools to not eat here, can I get you both something to drink while you take a gander at the menu? And are you waiting for anyone else?” Jensen hoped not, despite their crossed wires.

The younger man smiled demurely and passed over one menu to his daughter, which surprised Jensen. He guessed she couldn’t be more than five, but apparently her dad thought she could handle reading a menu all on her own. “It’s just us,” the man confirmed and Jensen gave a little, mental fist-pump over that bit of information. “I’ll take a glass of water and Jamie will have a glass of milk.” As soon as the word “milk” was out of his mouth, the little girl – Jamie, Jensen corrected himself, and he thought the name suited her perfectly – scrunched up her face. Jensen knew she was aiming for petulant, but she only looked damn adorable.

“Does it have to be milk again?” she sighed dramatically after the last word and Jensen bit the inside of his cheek, sure his undercutting her father’s mandate by laughing would not earn him any points with the man.

“Jamie Lillian Padalecki, I think you know the answer to that one,” he corrected her. If he’d pulled out the middle name that fast, Jensen guessed the milk issue must have been a recurring one.

“Yes, Mommy,” she replied quickly and studied her menu seriously.

Mommy.
The answer had been staring him right in the face all along, but Jensen hadn’t been able to wrap his head around the idea that such a tall guy was actually an omega, despite the subtle wafts of sweetness. Now that he knew, however, Jensen couldn’t help but eye the man’s clothing with dawning comprehension. He had layered his shirts probably not because he wanted to in the humid, summertime air, but because it helped hide what Jensen suspected must be a deceptively lean frame. Most omegas tended to be shorter than alphas and betas – it was simply how their genes ran – and almost all of them were slender, which arrogant alphas and some betas mistook for weakness. But omegas’ strengths were geared toward reproduction. Not only were they the only gender that could give birth to multiple litters (betas typically were able to carry only once, if that), they had a fierce, protective nature and were devoted to their offspring. It was one of the reasons that Jensen had always admired omegas and fantasized about falling in love with someone who turned out to be one, filling his house with love and, if they were lucky, children. He sometimes felt dirty about it, like he was playing into the stereotype of a domineering alpha wanting a protective, fertile omega to mate with, but he couldn't deny his attraction to their strengths. He supported all genders and definitely believed there were hurtful, damaging categorizations that needed to go and he didn’t want to think of himself as part of the problem, tamping down his desires.

Suppressants, for example, gave omegas some freedoms that their biology denied them. Not only did they help mask the naturally attractive aroma they exuded, which too many piggish alphas always pointed their fingers at when rape cases were brought before the courts, as though that was an indication of the omega “asking for it”, but gave them control over their reproductive organs, allowing thoughtful choices regarding offspring and consensual sex. They also helped temper heats, which were hard on omegas given how fertile they were, and freed them from being a slave to their biology. And there were pheromone sprays available that mimicked all of the genders’ scents, which allowed some the ability to match the gender they identified with. But these medical options were not universally accepted or available to everyone. Hardened traditionalists regarded these options as abominations, defying the natural order, while progressives pointed to them as the natural evolution of an enlightened society that embraced and harnessed the scientific knowledge they possessed. Over the last eight years, it had certainly appeared the country was headed in what Jensen believed was the right track under their current, beta president. Marriage between alphas and omegas had finally become a reality, which guaranteed the omega spouse additional rights and protections that a mateship did not. And it was about time, Jensen thought, considering alphas and betas had been allowed to marry since the legal concept was introduced centuries before. Suppressants had become easily accessible and, almost more importantly, affordable once the President had made sure Congressional committees had taken the big-name pharmaceutical companies to task over price gouging. But with the current election, and the growing support for the hardline, traditionalist Republican nominee, there were a lot of people growing anxious. And Jensen knew he was looking at two of them right now.

Pushing up the sleeves of his dark Henley past his muscled forearms, Jensen smiled broadly. “One water and a glass of milk,” he struggled to keep a straight face at the picture Jamie made with her tiny nose wrinkled, “for the little lady.” The young man shot him a grateful smile with his wide, petal-pink lips and Jensen felt his knees weaken when he saw the hint of twin dimples peek out. He was screwed.

“We’ve got two lunch specials today,” he said, fishing for a way to linger at their table. Pointing to the chalkboard behind the bar, he elaborated, “The lobster roll is a classic – fresh caught by yours truly, sweet and served on a warm, buttery roll with a splash of our homemade mayo. We had some prime rib leftover from last night’s dinner menu, so I highly recommend the Rib ‘More Than A Sandwich’ sandwich. Nice shavings served warm with smoked cheddar cheese, caramelized onions and horseradish mayo. Both come with our famous, bacon-dusted fries and a garlic pickle spear.”

Jamie’s mother glanced over Jensen’s shoulder to study the board. “Thank you,” he exhaled and
because Jensen thought he might be making the man uncomfortable with the way he had stuck around, he ducked his head, gave the little girl a quick wink and returned to his usual spot behind the bar. He got them their beverages and had to hide another chuckle at the put-upon sigh Jamie made at the sight of the dreaded milk. Jim was still taking his sweet time with his Rebel Rouzer IPA (and Steven must seriously be in the doghouse for him to stick around this long), so Jensen slid over another basket of peanuts for him and went back to polishing the bar. Years of keeping gear spit-shined and gleaming made the task soothing and the repetitive motions were something he could get lost in. In fact, he got lost enough that Jim cleared his throat and jerked his head back to the booth to get his attention. Jensen was surprised that ten minutes had come and gone, more than enough time for those two to make their lunch choices. He tucked the end of the towel in his back pocket and went back to their booth. Both of them had their menus open and laid flat on the table, clearly waiting for him to return, but the young guy hadn’t made a sound. Wherever they called home, he figured, they weren’t treated too well to stay silent like that.

“Sorry about that, folks,” Jensen led with an apology. “I didn’t know you were ready.”

“It’s my fault,” Jamie’s mother corrected him quickly. “I should have spoken up.”

And Jensen wanted to frown, because, no, it was not his fault. It was all on Jensen for not paying attention to his customers (although he was unwilling to admit he might have lost track of time daydreaming about having an omega and family of his own). But he was afraid if he made any kind of disapproving face, the guy sitting in front of him would probably misconstrue it and think it was directed at him. Accordingly, Jensen grinned easily and pulled out his order pad. “What did you decide on?”

Clearing her throat, Jamie smiled and Jensen spotted traces of her mother’s dimples in that sweet face. “I would like to have,” she began and then returned her attention back to the menu. With one finger, she carefully traced it under her choice. “I would like to have,” she said again, “the Amazing Grilled Cheese, made with Pineland Farm’s cheddar on Sorelia’s bread.” She stumbled on the baker’s name, but not by much.

“That’s a great choice,” he told her, jotting it down on his pad.

“It’s served,” she continued to read the description carefully, “with the house’s creamy coleslaw, pickles and golden fries from Green Thumb Farms potatoes finished with bacon dust.” When she was was done, she raised her face to her mother, who smiled warmly and gave her a “thumbs up”. He glanced nervously at Jensen then, maybe afraid he’d be irked with her unnecessary recitation. Jensen smiled easily at him, hoping it was clear he was fine with the girl practicing her impressive reading skills with their menu.

“That’s a great choice,” he told her, jotting it down on his pad.

“I’ll have the Seasonal Salad,” he started, pausing long enough for his daughter to find the item on the menu. When she did, she dragged her little finger along, sounding out the words as her mother listed all it’s ingredients as well as all the options for dressing before telling Jensen he’d have the balsamic vinaigrette. Jensen kept his pen poised, but the other man fiddled anxiously with the menu before closing it. “That’s it,” he finished sheepishly.

Jensen picked up the menus and promised them their food would be up in a few minutes. When he got back to the kitchen, he noticed the guy surreptitiously check his wallet and that decided it for Jensen. He gave DJ the order and tacked on a rib sandwich with extra fries. When he checked on Jim, the beta was giving him a sly smile.
“What?” Jensen asked.

The town doctor took a long swig of his beer, but didn’t say a word. He simply kept up that infuriating grin. “Oh, why don’t you go home to your husband?” Jensen huffed, swinging his towel over his shoulder.

“And here I didn’t think there was such a thing as a free lunch anymore,” Jim drawled, setting down his suddenly empty bottle. He dug several bills out of his wallet and placed them on the bar beside the peanuts. He tugged the brim of his battered, Red Sox cap at Jensen, gave one appraising look at the mother and daughter before winking at Jensen, and sauntered out.

Jensen scrubbed furiously at the ring of condensation Jim’s bottle had left behind on the bar since the doctor categorically refused to use a coaster and tried not to question where the need to make sure that guy ate a decent meal came from. He was pulling a rack of glasses out of the dishwasher when DJ rang the little bell in the serving hatch, letting him know his order was up. Jensen easily swung the heavy rack to the side and grabbed his towel to wipe at his damp hands before he touched the plates. He caught Jamie’s mother looking his way and he nodded to him. The younger man whipped his head back toward his daughter, who was animatedly talking with both her mouth and her hands and oblivious to the fact that she had lost her mother’s attention for a brief moment. Jensen quirked an eyebrow, wondering what that was about.

He gathered their food onto a tray and brought it over. Jamie, who was still talking a mile a minute, swinging her legs as fast as her lips moved, lit up when she saw her extra-gooey sandwich. When he sat the tray down, Jensen might have flexed his forearms more than was strictly necessary and cut his gaze to the side to see what the guy’s reaction was and Jensen wasn’t disappointed. The omega dropped his eyes and his face flushed a fetching rose that bled all the way down his long throat. But that color drained away as quickly as it had appeared when Jensen placed the rib sandwich in front of him.

“Oh-oh, no,” he stammered. “I’m really sorry, but there’s been a mistake.”

“No mistake,” Jensen was quick to reassure him. Tossing his head to one side, Jensen explained, “the lunch ‘rush’,” he laughed, indicating the empty pub, “is over and if you don’t help me out, I’m going to be stuck with food that’s only going to go to waste otherwise. Seriously,” he added as he placed the guy’s salad off to the side, making sure the sandwich was front and center. “If you two need anything else, give me a holler.” And he retreated before Jamie’s mother could come up with another reason why he couldn’t possibly accept the meal.

For the entirety of their lunch, Jensen made sure to keep himself busy behind the bar. That position gave him ample opportunity to observe them discreetly. Jamie’s mother had initially hesitated over the meal, spearing forkfuls of his salad instead, which was very tasty and locally sourced, but the alpha couldn’t hide his grin when the man caved in and took his first bite of the sandwich. Jensen had spent most of yesterday cooking the prime rib himself; he knew it was damn good, but seeing how Jamie’s mother appreciated it made him very pleased.

Watching them, Jensen was impressed with the subtle way the young omega (because Jensen would definitely have to card him if he ordered alcohol) kept his daughter on track. It was clear by her chatter that Jamie was a lively, outgoing child in the right environment, who could go off on any tangent. She was fascinated by the fishing net tacked on the wall near their booth and the colorful buoys that dangled overhead. Her mother indulged that curiosity, fed it even, judging by the way he talked with his hands as much as she did, but he managed to get her to eat most of her meal without harping or nagging. And Jensen chuckled as she drained the despised milk, nodding at something her mother said and looking around the bar, not realizing her glass was empty.
As he brought up the last crate of microbrews (and if he had brought up two more than necessary for Kim just to make certain she didn’t have to deal with it herself that night, she didn’t need to know), when he caught the young guy watching him. Jensen tried not to act like he noticed, but his chest puffed up almost against his will. He was only an alpha at the end of the day. Knowing someone he was attracted to was potentially returning the favor was a heady thing. He was trying to figure out how to approach the young man, maybe ask if they would pass back through Winnegance after they got done with whatever vacation they were taking, when a pair of alphas came into the pub. And when Jensen saw who it was, it took a herculean effort not to roll his eyes.

Ben Cotton and Callum Rennie were regulars, but not the kind that Jensen was grateful to have. Both alphas used to work at the Bath Iron Works, but had been laid off late last year. Under the current administration, led by their beta president, the country’s need for naval ships had dropped off significantly, which was only a natural progression considering there were far fewer military confrontations that involved the U.S. While most of the country, including the armed forces, were grateful for the peaceful direction their nation had taken, there were some casualties. And the Bath Iron Works, in business since 1884 making both private and military vessels, had been a mainstay employer for over a century. The layoffs in the last three years had hurt the community, and resentment had been building quietly ever since. The downside of a bar was that “quiet desperation” tended to become less quiet as the evening wore on. And ever since the race for president had narrowed down to the final two choices, with the traditional alpha promising to restore economic prosperity to the nation, folks like Ben and Callum were counting on a return to their glory days. And they weren’t shy about sharing their opinions.

They were grumbling about something between themselves as they flung open the door, but as soon as they spotted the mother and child, they both narrowed their gaze and made a show of scenting the air as they passed their booth. Ben, in his early forties, but still imposing with two inches on Jensen, sharp, blue eyes and wavy, brunet hair he combed up and away from his broad forehead, kind of hovered over the young omega and Jensen didn’t like the way it made Jamie’s mother round his shoulder in an attempt to disappear.

“What do you fellows want?” he asked assertively, exuding territorial alpha in his tone, knowing they’d be forced to respond to the challenge.

Ben stared at the omega a beat longer before he sauntered over to the bar and dropped down with comfortable familiarity onto one of the stools. Callum, a decade older than Ben, loitered at the table longer, and Jensen didn’t miss the subtle way the omega started to slide across the curved bench to get closer to his daughter.

“I haven’t got all day, Callum,” Jensen called out to him.

Shorter than his friend by half a foot, Callum’s blond hair was grayer these days, and his mustache and goatee were solid silver. He fixed the mother with a harsh glare before finally joining his partner in crime at the bar.

“Looks like you do to me,” he countered easily and Jensen heard the distinctive cadence in his speech that the Canadian hadn’t manage to lose despite having lived in Maine for a couple of decades. “Nothing but a pair of – ” he started and Jensen’s nostrils immediately flared, alpha pheromones rolling off of him. He wasn’t going to stand for the pair being disparaged, even if they were only passing through.

“You were saying,” Jensen growled, leaning across the bar with his broad shoulders to glare at the other alpha.

Callum shifted uneasily where he sat. “Doesn’t look like you’ve got more than a pair of flatlanders,”
he finally spat out, “so I don’t see what your hurry is.”

Jensen leaned back, pleased that Callum hadn’t made things any uglier than he already had. “Listen to you,” Jensen chuckled mirthlessly, “talking like a native.”

“Been here longer than you,” Ben piped up.

“True enough,” Jensen drawled, “but that don’t make you any more of a Downeaster than it does me. You know how it goes. If you aren’t born here, you’re not a Mainer. I think you two qualify for the illustrious title of ‘From Away’, same as me.”

“Whatever,” Ben groused. “I came here to catch a buzz on. Now, are you going to oblige us or not?”

“You boys planning on driving anywhere today?” Jensen asked. He took his job seriously and while he might sell alcohol, he did his best to be responsible about it. “Not going out on the water, are you?”

_Not that it would be much of a loss_, he thought to himself.

“No, Jensen,” Callum snapped. Staring at him, he gave Jensen a mean grin. “You identifying as omega these days with all the mothering? Is it catching here now?” Ben knocked his shoulder against Callum’s and they laughed at their stupid joke. Jensen was glad Kim wasn’t around to hear their nasty, transgender digs.

“You’re lucky I’m not an omega,” Jensen shot back and from the corner of his eye, he caught Jamie’s mother turning in his direction, “because if I was, I probably wouldn’t put up with you two at all.”

“Like an omega could do anything,” Callum scoffed. “We’re alphas.”

Jensen knew there was no way to end this amiably; he made the decision to redirect and retreat since it would spare the two in the booth any more of the alphas’ malicious rumblings. He pulled out a couple of shot glasses and held up a bottle of Jägermeister.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Ben grinned as Jensen poured them each a serving before grabbing a pair of King Titus porters. Jensen got them settled and then casually went to check on his diners.

He was sad to note that the little family’s spirited conversation had all but died since the alphas had blustered in. Jamie was sitting demurely in her seat and her mother hadn’t regained his former posture. Whatever hopes Jensen had of them returning died then and there. But he pasted on a cheerful face and clapped his hands together.

“Can I tempt either of you with some dessert?”

Jamie didn’t lift up her head. Her mother shook his ruefully, giving Jensen a tantalizing glimpse at the taut skin of his neck, and asked, “Could we have the check please?”

Jensen was disappointed but not surprised. The young man probably felt trapped, what with three alphas (two openly prejudiced) in the place with his daughter. Without meaning to check, Jensen hadn’t missed the lack of a mating bite on the omega’s neck when he had asked for the bill. Given the young man’s hesitancy around Jensen, he figured there would be even less of a chance of a ring on his finger. When he handed over the bill, Jensen only saw bare skin on his long, slender fingers. He was sure the two were on their own.

“I’m just gonna wrap up your leftovers,” he offered as Jamie’s mother reached for his wallet. “You
two might want to snack in the car later.” The omega furrowed his brow when Jensen suggested that and he didn’t miss how much the look resembled his daughter when told she had to have milk to drink. Jensen gathered up their dishes and took them back into the kitchen. DJ was getting the food prep area ready for the evening customers, who tended to mostly crave fried snacks with their brews. Jensen snapped together two, waxy takeout boxes and took care of their food. And if he added another rib sandwich to the guy’s box and topped up Jamie’s fries in hers, no one was the wiser.

Jensen sat the white boxes down on their table. Jamie was wiggling around in her seat, ready to leave. Rather than make the same mistake twice, Jensen grabbed the table, lifted it up and moved it back a foot. That gave her mother enough room to easily get her out of the booster seat himself and set her on the floor. The omega flashed him a rare smile and Jensen knew he was definitely screwed when he thought seeing it was like watching the sun coming out from behind a cloud bank.

Jamie brushed her hair out of her eyes and looked up at Jensen. “You’re not as tall as Mommy,” she remarked matter-of-factly while Jensen was sliding the table back into place. She crooked her finger and motioned him closer and he obliged by leaning down. “But you’re a better cook than he is,” she whispered loudly. From behind him, he didn’t miss Ben and Callum cackling about “mommy”.

“I wish I could take all the credit,” Jensen said with enough volume to drown out the idiots’ voices, “but I have a helper in the kitchen. I’ll bet if your mommy had the same one, you’d think his cooking was just as good.”

“Hmm,” she said thoughtfully, tapping her finger against her pointed chin. Jensen chuckled and handed the boxes to her mother. The omega’s smile fluttered briefly when he must have noticed the containers were heavier than expected. He flipped his head in an effort to get his bangs out of his eyes and Jensen was once again struck by how similar he was to his daughter. Marginally more successful at clearing away his hair than she was, he studied Jensen with a mixture of curiosity and something Jensen couldn’t name. It did give Jensen the opportunity to actually see his eyes and they were mesmerizing. Not just green or blue like he had first thought, they also had splashes of gold in them. They reminded Jensen of the sea.

“Thank you,” he murmured to Jensen, raising the boxes slightly. If he hadn’t been standing right beside him, Jensen didn’t think he would have heard him. The omega was clearly trying not to draw any unnecessary attention to himself or his child. He held out his hand and Jamie readily grasped it, her little fingers disappearing in her mother’s protective hold. Jensen decided to see them out, given how uncomfortable the young man was. He stayed on the side closest to the bar and walked them to the door. Swinging it open, Jensen forgot himself as he placed his other hand on the small of the omega’s back, guiding him outside.

Jensen blinked at the afternoon light. That was his only regret with their pub – there weren’t enough windows to let in the natural light. Working mostly evenings, he tended to forget about that. Realizing where he had placed his hand, he was embarrassed by his forwardness and he yanked it back, using it to shield his eyes instead.

“Beautiful day for a drive,” he remarked clumsily, still shocked at himself.

“Yeah,” Jamie’s mother agreed without conviction, apparently as startled by the unsolicited contact as Jensen was.

“You have spots!” Jamie declared, tickled with her discovery.

“Jamie Lillian,” the omega corrected her, “what have I told you about thinking before you say something?”
“Sorry, Mommy,” she apologized, before adding, “but he does.”

While Jensen certainly didn’t want to undermine her mother, he hated the thought that her mother lived in a world where he had to teach his child to be so very careful. Realizing he was crossing a line, he still said, “You’re sure right about that. I’m covered in freckles.”

Sensing she had an ally, Jamie pronounced, “My spots are bigger than yours, but I don’t have many.”

“No?” he wondered.

She whipped her head back and forth. “Nope. I’ve just got the one here,” she pointed to the side of her nose, “like Mommy.”

And Jensen hadn’t missed the few moles scattered over the younger man’s face, since he found them attractive.

“But he’s got them on his body, too,” she added helpfully.

“Jamie,” the omega hissed, but his whole face had grown crimson.

Jamie’s reveal affected Jensen almost the same way. He felt his cheeks getting hot as he tried really hard not to picture where else her mother might have beauty marks on him.

“Wow,” Jamie breathed. “I can really see your spots now.”

Jensen kind of wanted to crawl under a rock. He’d always hated his freckles, having been teased about them relentlessly as a child and as an adult. And when he blushed, they only stood out more. He was vaguely aware of the omega trying to hustle her away, but Jamie was rooted to the spot.

“I like them a lot,” she declared. “They’re really pretty. Don’t you think so, Mommy?” she asked, turning to her mother for confirmation.

The omega was beet red at this point. “I think they’re very nice,” he mumbled, not meeting Jensen’s eye. At least he hadn’t laughed at Jensen. That was something, he consoled himself. An alpha covered in freckles like a little kid.

Jamie nodded, curls bouncing as she did. “Me, too. They make you different,” she told Jensen seriously. “And different is good. Mommy says we’re all different, but that only means we’re all special. Not better and not worse than anybody else. U-something. What was that word again?”

“That’s right, baby. None of us are better or worse for the ways we’re different from each other. It’s just the way we’re made.”

“Unique,” he repeated for her and, despite his clear embarrassment, her mother smiled fondly at his daughter. “That’s right, baby. None of us are better or worse for the ways we’re different from each other. It’s just the way we’re made.”

“Unique,” Jamie repeated and then sighed like she had over the milk. “So many words,” she commiserated with Jensen and he laughed with her.

“So many,” he agreed. “But it looks like you’ve got a mommy who knows them all,” he pointed out.

“He does,” she beamed and swung her mother’s arm. “He can’t cook like you, but he knows all the words.”

Jensen dared to glance at the young omega then. He was still trying to entice his daughter to their car, but he was also peeking at Jensen through the safe cover of his bangs and Jensen wasn’t sure how to
interpret the look he was sending his way. He hoped he hadn’t gone too far in indulging the man’s daughter, but he didn’t know. If he scented the air, he’d at least have an idea how the other man felt, but Jensen wouldn’t cross that line with a stranger.

“If you pass by this way again,” he finally said awkwardly, “maybe you might consider stopping in.”

Jamie’s mother did that thing again where he furrowed his brows and a strange pattern of wrinkles appeared between them. Jensen was overcome with the insane urge to rub his thumb there and smooth them away. He kind of held his breath, curious if the other man might offer something in reply.

But whatever he might have said was lost when Jamie tugged insistently on his hand, anxious to cross the street now that they were on the move. Jensen resigned himself to never seeing the family again and raised his hand up, calling out, “Travel safe.”

Nodding to himself, he let the door slam behind him as he re-entered the pub. Ben and Callum were apparently too caught up in their shots and beer to pay much attention to him, which was probably for the best, because there was no way Jensen would tolerate their crap in the mood he was in. The place was rather lifeless with the strangers’ departure and he was all too aware of how dim it had become inside. He walked over to their table and had to sadly smile at the pile of bills and coins the young man had left. He didn’t bother to count it. He trusted that the omega had not only left enough to cover their tab, but had unnecessarily cleaned out his wallet to make sure Jensen had a fair tip. When he pocketed the money, he noticed some writing on the bill that wasn’t his.

Lifting it up, he saw the lettering was in the unsteady hand of a child.

“Thank you, Mister, for the GREAT lunch.” “Great” was underlined twice.

And there was a smiley face at the end as well as a “J2”.

J2?

The little girl’s name was Jamie, but there was no other J in either her middle or last name, so the only conclusion Jensen drew was that her mother’s name began with J as well.

Jay, he thought, picturing the dimples and the sweet, shy smile he’d gotten a glimpse of. It suited him. At least he had a name to remember him by, he mused, tucking the receipt into his own wallet. He wiped down their table with a wistful smile.

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Jensen made sure to roust Ben and Callum, both very much with a buzz on, before Kim’s shift was set to start. There was no way he wanted her to have to deal with either of them in the condition they were in. By the time she all but floated into the pub, they were long gone and some of their favorite regulars had already started their evening libations.

Jensen smirked as he folded up his towel. “Somebody’s in a good mood,” he told her as she was tying on her apron.

“Maybe,” she blushed, adding to the already rosy color she had when she entered.

“You two spend some time on the water?” Jensen remarked, noting her color.

“Nope,” Kim answered, adding an annoying pop to the “p”.

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Jensen faced the wall and let his head fall with a dull thunk against it. “I do not need to know,” he moaned. And he really didn’t want to hear about her sexual antics today of all days.

“If you got yourself a partner,” she whispered as she walked by him, “you wouldn’t need to live vicariously through me.”

Jensen groaned and ducked into the kitchen, meaning to disappear up the back stairs to his place. He definitely couldn’t handle smug and satisfied Kim after the day he had. But before he could make his getaway, she caught him by their dry goods storeroom.

“Hey, you never said anything about my hair,” she teased, shaking her locks out in front of him.

Jensen placed his hands on his hips and pretended to inspect it. “Definitely not regulation,” he finally admitted.

She slug him in the bicep, grinning when he winced at the strength behind the gesture. “Not all of us keep it high and tight like you,” she teased. Jensen had to admit, it was still odd to see Kim with hair past her chin, but the cut suited her face.

“The purple is a nice touch,” he conceded.

She fingered the amethyst streaks. “Needed to jazz things up a little.”

“Different is good,” Jensen replied, parroting Jamie’s words from earlier.

“Exactly,” Kim agreed. “But before you go,” she continued, grabbing ahold of Jensen’s arm, “did you hear the news?”

In a town of less than two thousand, there was never much in the way of news. “Must have missed it,” he said, half-eager to make his exit.

To your empty apartment, an annoying voice reminded him. Not a home.

“The old Callahan place sold,” Kim told him breathlessly.

There were very few, new additions to the town. As a matter of fact, she and Jensen were still the most recent arrivals and had barely graduated from “Year Round Summer Folk” to “From Away”, the highest pinnacle anyone not born in Maine could hope to achieve, after five years.

“Huh.”

“Huh?” she groused. “Is that all you have to say when I come bearing the news that our illustrious town’s population has increased by two? That’s like a whole point one percent.”

“Has Briana alerted the media yet or is she leaving that to you?” Jensen teased.

“Ass,” Kim groused, hitting him again.

“Ow. Keep that up and I’m going to have to file a workers’ comp claim, alpha,” he moaned, rubbing his arm.

“Do you want the 4-1-1 or not?”

Jensen knew she was dying to share whatever tidbit Briana must have told her about the newcomers. “Hit me,” he sighed and then twisted away before she could do just that again.
“I guess the Hyde School was finally able to hire a new teacher. English Lit and French, so they can offer that language in addition to Spanish,” she informed him.

“The prep school in Bath?” Jensen was familiar with the place. Touted itself as a very inclusive kind of learning environment. He thought they were a little too earthy crunchy in the way they graded their students with monthly “check in’s”, but it was a decent facility and the only college preparatory school in the county. “Isn’t that mostly a boarding school? Why isn’t the teacher living in one of their dorms?”

Kim shuffled closer, giving DJ a quick smile and a wave when he looked up from the stove. “Apparently, they were afraid their young, impressionable students might not be able to control themselves living in close proximity to an unmated omega,” she said in a low, conspiratorial tone, “especially with a kid. So much for progressive, huh?” she added and didn’t bother to hide her disgust.

An unmated omega with a child. It couldn’t be.

“So instead of providing housing, she had to find it on her own?” Jensen asked, using his pronouns very carefully.

“Not ‘she’,” Kim corrected him, “he. Briana swung by yesterday when he and his daughter arrived so that she could welcome him to the town properly. She said he was a nervous fella, but sweet as can be. And she could not stop going on and on about his daughter. Said she was the spitting image of her mother and talked about a mile a minute. And he’s apparently taller than you, which I find hard to believe seeing as you’re almost a giant.”

Jensen mouth dried out. Jamie and Jay. It had to be.

“You didn’t happen to catch their names, did you?” he croaked.

Kim had already started to walk away. “It was definitely a mouthful,” she chuckled, leaning around DJ to steal a fry from a basket of them mixed with fried clams. He squawked at her and slapped away her hands. “Pada-something,” she chewed thoughtfully. “Jared and Jamie Pada-something.”

Jared. Jared Padalecki.

“Whelp, back to the salt mines. Thanks, doll,” she stood on tiptoes, planting a kiss on Jensen’s cheek, “for a wonderful day off. Hope it wasn’t too miserable for ya here.” And she grabbed the basket of fried goodies to take to the patron out front.

Half in a daze, Jensen mulled over the bombshell Kim had inadvertently dropped in his lap as he marched up the stairs. It did sort of explain why the omega had given him such an odd look when he left. He probably figured the word was already out about him, seeing how small the town was, and Jensen was giving him the bum’s rush out of the pub with his “have a good trip” and “maybe you’ll come back someday” shtick like it was code for “don’t let the door hit you in the ass on your way out”, which couldn’t be further from the truth.

He flicked on the light when he reached his apartment. It was as neat as a pin, a place for everything and everything in its place. Not for the first time, he wondered what it would be like to come home to someone. Maybe there would be some clutter on the coffee table; a toy or two scattered on the floor. And, most importantly, someone waiting for him who was happy to see him and eager to share his day with Jensen and hear how his had been in turn.

Flopping down onto his oversized, leather couch, Jensen dragged his fingers through his short, light-
brown hair. When he pictured someone waiting for him, now all he saw were dimples and wide smiles. He dropped his head back and sighed loudly.

He was so screwed.
Chapter 2

It was nearly a month before Jensen saw Jared and Jamie again. Well, technically, he had seen them sooner although they hadn’t seen him. About a week after finding out Jared’s name, Jensen had decided to take the scenic route to work and, considering he lived above the pub, riding his Indian Scout Sixty past Bob Callahan’s old place was pretty damn scenic. It had been a beautiful July afternoon, perfect for tooling around on his bike and he had just happened to wind his way down Quaker Point Road. Complete coincidence.

More like creepy stalker, he scolded himself.

As he slowed down to take the curve, he found himself by Jared’s house. Callahan’s place was by no means a dump, but labeling it a “fixer upper” might have been too optimistic. It needed a lot of TLC. A slapdash paint job and some curbside appeal landscaping didn’t change that. But Jensen knew the price Bob had been asking was completely fair given its condition, which translated to dirt cheap. A picture had formed in Jensen’s head about Jared’s financial situation and it was not a happy one.

Jensen knew that since Jared was an omega with no claim or ring, he had no legal recourse to seek child support from Jamie’s sire. Going through the courts wasn’t necessary if the alpha decided to be a stand-up person and acknowledge their progeny, but somehow Jensen didn’t figure Jamie’s was. And that meant that unless Jared had a very understanding family and friends as a support system, he was on his own. Judging by where Jared had landed, Jensen wrote the family off like they had likely written Jared off. The quarters that had been part of his tip also clued Jensen in. Jared was scraping by, probably having spent everything to get him and his daughter out here, making sure she had what she needed. Jensen suspected they were going to be on a very tight budget until school, with the guarantee of a regular paycheck, started.

Since no one was out front and there was no sign of a car in the driveway, Jensen took a little longer than necessary to drive by, closely scoping out the house. It wasn’t in horrible shape, Jensen decided, but definitely needed some repairs to the roof before winter blew in, not to mention the front porch could use some attention and the fencing flat out need to be replaced, especially when a rambunctious child was in the picture. Jensen was certain Jamie was a good girl, but she was a curious one and had more than likely gotten into mischief now and again. A sturdy fence would give her mother peace of mind. It was all doable, but a hell of a lot of work for one person. Jensen might have hung around longer taking inventory if a very used Ford Fiesta (Seriously? How did Jared even fit in it?) hadn’t puttered into view from the opposite direction. Flustered at being caught out, Jensen shifted gears, opened up the throttle and tore out of there. He didn’t chance looking their way and as soon as he was around the corner, he wanted to kick himself for how it must have looked not even waving to them. With a sinking feeling, Jensen was sure he’d firmly cemented himself in the “asshole alpha” category as far as Jared was concerned.

So it was no surprise he didn’t see the little family in the pub after that. There was a shot that working the evening shift might have been why. It was a good town, but it did get a little rowdy at night sometimes and the bar wasn’t always the best place for a young child. That was the excuse he told himself the first two weeks they were no-shows. After that, he had to accept that they were avoiding the place. Despite the obvious, a hopeful voice reminded him that they had limited revenue and with school still almost two months off, maybe Jared simply couldn’t afford eating out. And that realization had nothing to do with the proposal he suggested Friday night when he sat down with Kim in his living room for their weekly meeting to go over the books and order supplies and such.
“So, I had a thought,” he started after they had balanced the pub ledger.

“Did it hurt?” Kim quipped, walking over to his kitchen and rummaging around in his fridge. She returned with two chilled lonenecks.

“Shut up,” he groused and then cleared his throat as he accepted the beer. “I was thinking maybe we should start a loyalty club for lunch. Get some cards made up and everything. One of those ‘buy five lunches and get the sixth one free’ kinda deals.”

Kim laughed and took a swig of her beer. Wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand, she frowned slightly. “You’re serious?”

“Well, yeah,” Jensen began, rubbing at the back of his neck. “It’s a great hook for tourists. They pass through after trying to be thrifty at the Freeport Outlets and we give ‘em a reason to come back by offering a free meal. They tuck that card in their wallet and it’s as good as walking away with a business card.”

“I understand how loyalty programs work, Jensen,” she huffed at him. Rolling out her lower lip, she rocked her head from side to side. “I don’t suppose it would hurt.”

“We’ve already got the card stock and a printer,” Jensen added. “DJ could probably whip up a design on his laptop like he did for our business cards and all we’d need to buy is some kinda distinctive rubber stamp to mark them with. Plus,” and he hoped he wasn’t selling it too hard, “it might get some of the folks around here to stop in more often.”

Kim, who had been nodding along, stopped bobbing her head. She narrowed her gaze for a moment, before she quirked one side of her mouth upwards. “It just might.” Flipping a grape tinted strand of hair around her finger, she added almost too casually, “Speaking of returning customers, do you happen to remember the new family that moved in?”


“They’re fine. In fact, they’ve stopped in for lunch a couple of times last week and over the weekend,” she informed him.

“Oh,” Jensen said, hiding his disappointment that they’d come in when it wasn’t his shift or his weekend to work.

“I’m not sure how many times they would have kept coming in if that little pipsqueak hadn’t flat out asked me when they were leaving last Saturday if the man with the ‘pretty spots’ still worked here,” and she sucked in her cheeks so hard, it gave her fish lips.

Jensen took a long pull of his beer, trying to hide his face. He was embarrassed that Kim had heard about his “spots”, but inordinately pleased at the thought that they had asked about him. Or, well, at least he’d made an impression with Jamie.

“Yeah,” Kim went on, pretending she hadn’t seen Jensen’s blush, “she was polite enough when she asked, but her poor mother got as red as a boiled lobster. It’s funny…” she trailed off and sipped her IPA.

“What?” Jensen croaked, inhaling more than swallowing his mouthful of beer.

“Oh,” she continued nonchalantly, “as mortified as he seemed to be, he didn’t hustle her out like some parents do when their kids embarrass them. He stood there and almost seemed to be paying attention when I explained to her how you and I swap weekends and that you’d be on tomorrow.”
She leaned back into the couch, nursing her bottle. “You know,” she added like the idea had only come to her, “that loyalty program might be a good thing for someone like Jared and his daughter. You know, trying to make ends meet.”

“Yeah,” Jensen mumbled, mind whirling at the real possibilities of seeing them again.

Nodding to herself, Kim reiterated, “It’s not charity, but rewarding people for their return business. I’ll bet DJ could put something together tonight for us to launch this weekend. We can sign our names on the cards for now until we can get that rubber stamp you were talking about. Hey,” she added, “maybe we could have a contest with the kids. Let them draw a design that they think we should use and the winner could get desserts free for a month, or something like that. Make it a community thing.”

Jensen smiled at her warmly. He knew she had him all figured out and had his back, like always. “Community spirit is a good thing,” he agreed, “especially now.” The upcoming election was about the only thing anyone talked about anymore, and that talk wasn’t always pretty. It was taking a toll even on their small town.

“Yeah,” Kim exhaled, rubbing the bridge of her nose, “good times.” She appeared to be on the verge of saying something else, but stopped herself. “I should let you get to it,” she announced, slapping her palms on her thighs. Dropping her empty in Jensen’s recycling container, she grinned at him from the doorway to downstairs. “You’re probably going to have an eventful weekend. Have fun and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She waved over her shoulder as she left.

Shouting after her, he yelled, “Considering some of the stuff you’ve told me about Briana, that doesn’t leave much.”

“Aw, baby, don’t be jealous,” her voice drifted up from the stairwell below.

_They could be here tomorrow_, he realized.

And if Jensen screwed up more orders and had to give out more free drinks that night than he had since they’d first opened, he was reasonably sure that DJ would keep his lips zipped.

Pretty sure.

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Not only had Jared come in that weekend (on Sunday, so Jensen had the entirety of Saturday to best his all-time worst record set the night before), but the young omega and his daughter had also popped in a few times during the week, in the early evening as soon as Jensen came on but before the crowd got too rambunctious. Jamie had been ecstatic about the art contest (as had the other younger children of Winnegance). Jensen had to chuckle over the fact that his idea might actually boost their local lunch business, even though that had not entirely been his intention. Despite the uptick in traffic, Jensen had still managed to exchange more than merely a few pleasantries with the family.

Jensen was delighted to learn about them over time. Granted, it was almost exclusively through Jamie that he did so, but Jensen took it as a hopeful sign that Jared kept bringing them back. In fact, it was a slip that Jamie made one Saturday that was the reason why Jensen was getting his boat ready at dawn on his day off and not for fishing.

He’d made a passing remark about Jamie’s rosy cheeks and asked her how she liked living by the beach. With her typical enthusiasm, she’d gone on and on about how nice it was to live next to the water for the first time. When he’d pressed her about how cold the ocean was, even in August, she’d
admitted it froze her toes. When he’d teasingly asked if nothing else had fallen off, she had explained that she hadn’t been swimming in it yet because she didn’t know how to swim. Jensen had been surprised and she had picked up on his shock, rapidly explaining how her mommy had signed her up for lessons through what would be her kindergarten class in the fall where there was an indoor pool. Jared had turned away and mumbled about how he couldn’t teach her because he didn’t know how himself. Feeling badly about making them both embarrassed, Jensen had offered to take them out on his boat.

“Just because you’re not ready to get in it yet,” he had said, “doesn’t mean you can’t get a closer look. Plus, I can take you farther than you could hope to swim anyway.”

Judging by Jared’s expression, it was clear he was about to beg off, but Jamie’s face practically lit up. “Oh,” she had breathed, her little cupid’s bow mouth in a perfect circle, “could we, Mommy?” And Jared had eventually agreed after asking a dozen times if Jensen was certain it was no trouble.

So here Jensen was, lugging a cooler full of juice, water and a few, other surprises onto his thirty-eight-foot lobster boat, although the general populace was in agreement that it was more a lobster yacht with all the amenities he’d added like the V berth, enclosed head and two burner propane stove. Everything else was traditional, if one could even describe a lobster boat as such, and Jensen had spent close to an entire year lovingly restoring the built-down cedar on oak vessel that was nearly fifty years old. He’d rebuilt the engine himself and also redone the interior in mahogany, going so far as to find antique, bronze rod holders to finish it off. The sun was barely skirting the horizon, slowly warming the midnight blue to something softer when he heard the telltale patter of feet coming down the dock.

“Ahoy there,” he called out, waving his hand at the pair. “Glad to see you found me.”

Holding his daughter’s hand tightly, Jared waved back with the other. Looking around, he gave the boats moored nearby a cursory glance. When he turned to face Jensen, he had a small grin. “You were right,” Jared told him. “They all do look the same.”

“Yeah,” Jensen agreed, stowing the cooler and moving to the starboard side, “around here, pretty much everyone who has a boat has a lobster boat. They’re the pick-up truck of the Maine coast.”

“They kinda look like one,” Jamie agreed, “with a cab in front and a flatbed in back.”

Jensen’s eyebrows rose in amazement. “You never told me you were a car girl, Jamie. A woman after my own heart,” he admitted, pressing a hand against his chest dramatically.

Jamie took it all in stride, nodding along. “I know a lot. Mommy wants to make sure I’m good and rounded.”

“Well rounded, baby,” Jared gently corrected her. “Now, say it like we practiced,” he reminded her.

“Oh,” her eyes got impossibly wider, “that’s right.” She stood very straight, looked Jensen in the eye and asked, “Permission to come aboard, sir?”

Jensen was touched. Too often folks who spent no time around boats didn’t get the concept that they were private places the same as a home. Unless intimately familiar with the owner, guests always asked to step onboard like someone knocking on a front door. “Permission granted,” Jensen happily told her and checked with Jared before swinging her over the side onto his boat. He noticed Jared studying the stern.

“The All In, huh?” he asked with a grin.
Jensen cocked his head to the side. “It’s the only way I roll,” he admitted honestly, offering his hand to the young omega. “Let me help. It can be a little unsettling the first time on the water.”

Jared chewed on his lower lip, but accepted Jensen’s hand. And Jensen was hard-pressed not to gasp at the feeling of those long, slender fingers wrapping around his calloused ones. He steadied Jared until the omega indicated he was all right. “Okay,” Jensen rasped, still reeling from the contact, “first things first.”

He ducked into the cockpit and pulled out a child-size lifejacket from a storage cupboard. Jamie frowned at the bright, orange thing and looked down at her baby-blue, faded jeans, pink t-shirt and windbreaker. “It doesn’t match,” she told Jensen in all seriousness.

Jensen chuckled as he kneeled in front of her. “Honey,” he explained, “it’s not supposed to. It’s has to be the most obnoxious color in the world so that if you happen to fall overboard, we could see you right away.”

“Oh,” she murmured as Jensen attached the straps and made sure they weren’t too tight or too loose. “That explains it then, because this sure is an ugly color.”

Jensen and Jared both laughed. Stroking her hair, which was tied back into a small ponytail, Jared spoke mostly to Jensen when he said, “My all-knowing, all-wise daughter. Now, Jamie, I want you to listen to Captain Ackles very closely, because I’m sure he’s going to tell you all the rules we need to follow while we’re on his ship.”

Jensen’s lips parted at the title. He had to admit, being addressed like that by Jared did things to him that he didn’t want to acknowledge. “Not so fast, landlubber” he managed to say, when he got ahold of himself. He reached back and held up an adult-sized one for Jared.

“Really?” the omega practically squeaked. “Do I have to?”

“Unless you’ve learned how to swim in the last, two days, this one’s for you.”

Jared shook his head, his wavy hair falling into his eyes and Jensen wanted nothing more than to tuck the unruly strands behind his ears. He had to settle for helping him put the flotation device on, running his hands expertly along the straps, slipping his arms around Jared’s narrow waist and smoothing one where it had bunched up in the back. “Not going to let anything happen to you,” he said softer than he had intended. But there was a warmth in Jared’s eyes that he didn’t miss. And the omega didn’t shrug out of the circle of his arms, either.

Stepping back reluctantly, Jensen addressed them both. “The deck is what we call the floor here,” he tapped his foot accordingly, “and it can get surprisingly slippery, so no running. Don’t hang off the sides too far, because the boat can bounce around and you might fly right out of it. Towards the bow,” he pointed to the front of the boat, “is the cockpit. In here,” he motioned for them to follow, “is a bunch of electrical equipment. Now,” he hunkered down to Jamie’s level, “you can ask me about anything in here, but don’t handle stuff without checking with me first. Deal?”

“Deal,” she declared with a definitive bob of her head.

“I do want you both to know about the radio. It’s off right now, but here’s the power button to turn it on. It will be on the entire time we’re on the water. If something were to happen to me and either of you needed help, you put it on this station,” and he paused as Jamie stepped closer to get a good look as he flipped the dial to channel sixteen, “grab the microphone, press the button on the side and call for help.” He told them the correct terms the Coast Guard would know and assured them to keep talking and explain the situation even if no one had responded yet. “They tape everything, so they
can playback something they might have missed. That being said, I have never had a problem on this boat.”

“Not even once?” Jamie asked.

“Not even once,” he assured her. “I only told you about that stuff because I want you both to know how to help yourself if you need to, okay?”

“Aye, aye, captain,” the little girl chirped and leaned her head back against her mother’s hip, giving him a blinding grin.

“Looks like you’ve got the makings of a fine first mate,” Jensen told her.

“Did you hear that, Mommy? I can be Jensen’s mate,” she repeated excitedly, unaware of both her mother’s and Jensen’s growing embarrassment.

“Well,” Jensen sputtered, “that’s not quite what I mea-” he started to stutter, when Jamie whirled around and asked, “What’s a mate?”

Puffing out a loud breath, Jensen scratched the back of his neck. “A first mate on a boat,” he placed extra emphasis on the adjective, “is like the second-in-command.” He wasn’t sure what kind of talks she and her mother had had about the other kind of mate, but Jensen didn’t think it was his place to explain that bit of biology to her. “The word can mean something else, which I bet your mother can tell you about later.”

Jamie opened her mouth as she turned back to Jared, little finger raised and Jensen knew she was going to demand to know all the meanings of the word. Hoping to head her off at the pass, he added, “Did you want to see down below before we head out?”

“There’s more?” she asked, interest renewed in his boat.

Crisis averted.

Swinging open a hatch to his left, Jensen revealed a small stairwell. “Down there is the engine, the head and a berth.”

“Whose head do you have down there?” Jamie wondered suspiciously, crossing her arms awkwardly over her lifejacket. Jared hid a laugh behind his hand.

“That’s what we call a toilet on a boat,” Jensen explained.

“Why not just call it a toilet like everybody else?” she pointed out logically.

Jensen drew in a deep breath, but before he could answer, Jared cut in.

“She’s kind of like this,” he said sheepishly, “so unless you’re prepared to answer every question under the sun, go ahead and ignore her or send her back to me.” He shrugged his shoulders and there was defeat in the gesture.

Jensen made sure to school his features not to scare Jared. The idea, however, of how quick Jared was to make sure they faded into the background simultaneously angered him and broke his heart. “Now why in the world would I have the two of you with me if I planned to ignore you? Sounds kind of silly, doesn’t it?” He posed the last question to Jamie.

“Sure does,” she vigorously agreed, giving her mother an exasperated look. “Sometimes Mommy is
“Goofy like that,” she offered by way of explanation to Jensen.

“Still a keeper, though, right?” he nudged her shoulder.

“Duh,” she retorted. The way she regarded him then made Jensen think she might have shifted him to the goofy category, too.

After explaining the nautical origin of the “head” and giving her the grand tour as well as a peek at the engine, Jensen was ready to cast off. Jared and Jamie sat on the cockpit bench at the stern. The omega had his arm wrapped around his daughter’s shoulders, holding her tight as they pulled away from the dock. They were hardly alone on the water, with at least a dozen other boats heading out for a day’s fishing and another two dozen or so still moored behind them.

“There are a lot of boats around here,” Jared remarked loudly enough for Jensen to hear as he started up the motor. “Does everyone in town have one?”

Twisting his head around, Jensen joked, “We like to say we’re a drinking town with a fishing problem.”

Jared laughed but Jamie only wrinkled up her nose. “Why is that funny? It didn’t seem funny.”

Jensen, still facing them, explained, “It’s supposed to be a play on words. You take a sentence that people know really well and turn it around into something unexpected. Saying something or someone has a drinking problem is the usual line, not a fishing problem.”

“Oh,” she bobbed her head agreeably. After a moment, she announced plainly “Mommy has a drinking problem.”

Jensen’s gaze flashed up to Jared, but the omega merely appeared perplexed by his daughter’s statement, not ashamed or embarrassed. As the owner of a bar, Jensen was very aware that omegas were more susceptible to the effects of alcohol than betas or alphas. It had to do with how their metabolism ran and how that affected their absorption rates of alcohol. On average, they got inebriated faster and the alcohol stayed concentrated in their bloodstream longer. Jensen had seen his share of others attempting to get omegas drunk to take advantage of them and put a stop to it. He’d never seen Jared drink anything remotely alcoholic, but he wondered if the omega was a closet drinker. It didn’t seem to fit what he knew about him, though.

“I do?” Jared prodded her. “That’s news to me.”

She shifted around in his grasp, swatting at her bangs, which blew in the slight breeze of the boat’s forward motion. “Yes,” she answered firmly. “You always make me drink milk with my meals and I,” she paused to fist her hands on her hips, “think that is a problem. Don’t you, Captain Ackles?”

And Jensen pursed his lips, probably making a ridiculous duck face, as he contemplated what was in his cooler. Facing forward and busyising himself with the wheel, he hid his chuckle by adjusting the throttle and squinted at the rising sun. This was his favorite time of day, when dawn broke over the ocean, stretching its pink tendrils across the cobalt blue sky. The waters were calm with the boat cutting smoothly through the morning waves. He tipped his head back and breathed in the tangy air, letting the smell settle in his bones. Taking a chance, he glanced back quickly, grinning crookedly at what he saw.

Jamie was practically in her mother’s lap, pointing at everything – the boats, the water, the wheeling gulls and the sun as it rose like a phoenix from its watery bed of ashes. Jared curled his arms around her waist and rested his chin on the top of her head. Jensen wasn’t able to hear what they were
saying, but the gentle smile that lifted Jared’s lips was enough for him to feel satisfied. Their course plotted into the autopilot even though Jensen knew the route like the back of his hand, he double-checked the weather forecast (pointless with nothing but clear skies as far as the eye could see) and sent out a call to a friend to make sure there were no surprises along their route. If he had stepped outside his body, Jensen would probably have laughed his ass off at himself, fussing over such a milk run, but the need to protect his passengers was undeniable. Jensen was alternately happy and confused by his desire to make sure Jared and Jamie were safe and that he was the one responsible for their well-being. He wasn’t sure he had ever felt this strongly for the people under his command when he was in the Navy. It left him strangely off-kilter and, for someone who demanded self-control, confused.

It didn’t take long for Jamie to squirm out of Jared’s hold and carefully cover the short distance to where Jensen was standing. He didn’t hesitate this time and easily lifted her up to set her on the dash, pointing out the autopilot and the depth gauge and the radar. He was pleased by how carefully she listened as he explained how each device worked, genuinely interested in the mechanics of it all, fingers constantly in motion and toying with her lifejacket straps all the while.

“But don’t you just want to go sometimes?” she eventually wondered.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. Smiling, he added, “Aim her towards the second star to the right and straight on ‘til morning.”

“You can go to Neverland?” Jamie gasped, mouth open in surprise.

He cocked his head to the side. “Haven’t tried it yet. Maybe one day.”

“Take Mommy and me if you do,” she implored him. “Please.” She was all big eyes and tiny, perfect teeth.

“If I went somewhere that special, I’d make sure to invite you two,” he promised, brushing a few strands of hair out of her eyes. The gesture was too familiar and he chanced a look back at Jared, but the omega only smiled and fumbled around his preserver to button up his denim jacket. This early in the morning, it was still very cool on the water and they were traveling fast enough to create a breeze. Jensen was tempted to motion Jared over to the shelter of the cockpit, but he appreciated that the younger man was trusting him with his daughter and not hovering. It made Jensen proud to be the recipient of such a monumental gesture.

Jamie, like Jared had warned, was full of questions. For a four-and-three quarter-year old child (“I’ll be five in November”), Jamie was well-versed in a lot of age appropriate literature and had an impressive vocabulary, too. She asked mostly pertinent questions that he knew how to answer (“How does the engine move the boat when there are no wheels like on a car?”) and a few that he could only guess at (“What do the fish think when you drive over them? Do they think you’re a bigger fish? Are they scared of you?”). She listened intently, tapping her finger thoughtfully against her chin, which had the hint of a cleft like her mommy’s, and added her own theories to his. Eventually, when she ran a tiny bit out of steam, she asked to be helped down and scampered back to Jared.

Jensen slowed down as they got near Pemaquid Point Lighthouse. He really wanted to see what they thought of the landscape. Stepping away from the wheel, he joined the family at the stern, pointing out the lighthouse, which was easily visible from where they were drifting. Jamie had lots of questions and, thankfully, Jensen knew the answer to every, single one.

“Candles? Really? That’s what made it shiny?”
“And they could be seen as far away as two miles back then,” Jensen assured her. “But, at night, there wasn’t the light pollution we have now.”

“There are so many houses and people and cars that the night is much brighter than it used to be,” Jared chimed in, knowing his daughter wouldn’t know what Jensen meant, “blotting out the stars and the moon.”

Climbing up onto her knees on the bench, she pointed eagerly to the rocky shore. “That looks so different,” she said, hand flapping toward the distinctive coastline. Thoughtful, she tilted her head to the side. “It looks more like tree bark than a beach.”

“Or like a sheaf of papers that was partially burned, the way the rocks are stacked on top of each other horizontally in shades of black, gray and white. Is it shale?” Jared asked him with an expression not unlike the one his daughter wore.

Jensen proceeded to explain how that unique formation had its origins hundreds of millions of years ago when underground heat and pressure tortured and folded the rocks into the striking patterns they formed. “And the sea and weather keeps polishing them to this day,” he finished for his rapt audience and started the boat forward again.

Another hour was all it took for Jensen’s destination to appear. Deer Isle had West Bath beat by a couple of dozen residents. But it wasn’t the town that Jensen was interested in. It was the local wildlife that, like clockwork, had congregated on the rocks surrounding the island in the low tide. He’d timed it perfectly.

Jensen pulled up near enough to watch them, but not close enough to intrude or be viewed as threatening. He dropped anchor, shed his long-sleeved shirt and joined his passengers, eager to see their reactions.

“We’re here,” he announced, sitting down on the bench beside Jared.

“Where’s here?” Jamie asked.

“Deer Isle,” Jensen told her. Anticipating her first question, he began, “Back in the late 1700s, there were deer everywhere, so that’s what they named the place. What do you think?”

Jamie wiggled off the padded bench and stood up, sniffing. “The air is different out here,” she declared. “It’s heavier than at home.” Smacking her lips, she add, “You can almost taste it. I like it.”

Jensen was startled by how much the little girl’s impressions mirrored his as he breathed in the familiar saltiness. “I feel the same way,” he confessed. Shaking his head, he pointed to the rocks surrounding the island. “What do you see there?”

Jamie went to the port side of the boat, holding onto the railing like she’d been told to. It took a moment before she noticed the silver skinned mammals scattered about and lounging around on the natural haulouts. “Seals,” she all but squealed. “Mommy, look at all the seals.” She was practically vibrating in her excitement.

Jared got up carefully and Jensen realized he’d been seated the entire time. He worried that maybe the omega had been seasick and had stayed quiet about it for the sake of his daughter. That seemed like something Jared would do. Jensen jumped to his feet, one hand sliding along the small of Jared’s back. “You okay?” he asked solicitously.

Jared started at the touch, but didn’t move away. “Still getting my sea legs,” he joked and grinned wide enough that dimples appeared. “I don’t think I’m the natural that my daughter is.”
Jensen grew bold and left his hand in place. “She’s something else,” he replied. “Someone to be proud of,” he continued earnestly, getting lost in Jared’s blue-green eyes.

“Babies!” Jamie gasped. “There are babies!” she pointed out shakily.

Both men turned to watch as the harbor seal mothers nursed their shiny, onyx pups. Jensen knew this was probably the last week that they would, since harbor seals only nursed their young for a month and a half tops before they left them to search for a new mate. The offspring would be on their own then. But he decided that Jamie didn’t need to learn that last part just yet.

“Oh,” Jamie wrapped her arms around her chest and hugged herself, “I wish I could have one.”

Jensen chuckled until he caught Jared’s horrified expression. Trying to distract her from noticing her mother, he teased, “Now where in the world would you put a seal pup?”

Jared, still riveted to the scene in front of her, waved one hand dismissively. “I don’t want a baby.”

Jensen didn’t miss the relieved sigh Jared let out and how his shoulders slowly lowered.

“I wouldn’t want to take a baby from its mommy,” she continued seriously, twisting back to stare up at him. In the late morning sunlight, her eyes were bluer than her mother’s. Turning around, she added, “But I would love to be able to have a seal as a friend.” She fiddled with the zipper of her windbreaker while she stared at the resting mammals.

“And where would we keep one?” Jared questioned her with a grin, helping her to struggle out of the jacket while keeping her life-preserver on. Now that they were anchored with no breeze to chill them, the August sun had begun to heat them all. “I don’t think a seal would fit in the bathtub.”

Jensen bit the inside of his mouth at the hairy eyeball Jamie threw at her mother as she parted her lips.

“And don’t say ‘duh’, Jamie,” he corrected her gently with one finger raised.

“Even if it’s true?” she retorted, eyebrows disappearing into her bangs.

Folding her jacket carefully, Jared tucked it under one of the cockpit bench’s cushions. “Even if it’s true. There are better words than that.”

Jamie huffed dramatically and tapped her chin again, which Jensen was learning was her signal that she was thinking. Finally, she rolled her eyes and opened her mouth wide as she replied, “Obviously, we can’t keep it in the bathtub.”

Unlike Jensen, Jared didn’t hide his smile. His dimples cut deep gouges into his cheeks and the tip of his pink tongue was caught between his even, white teeth. “Obviously,” he agreed.

“It would be neat to be friends is all,” she repeated, hanging onto the railing wistfully.

“You can be,” Jensen told her easily. “You can be friends with all of them if you want.”

“Really?” Jamie lit up.

“Sure. Harbor seals stick pretty close to one area and this group stays here. I see them all the time,” he assured her. “And whenever the weather is good and you get permission from your mom, you can come out here with me to visit them.”

“Can I, Mommy?” She turned soulful eyes towards Jared and Jensen didn’t think he could resist such
a look. But then he realized that he might have overstepped his bounds again. He should have talked about it with Jared in private first, instead of putting the young omega mother at such a disadvantage. It was simply that he wanted to make Jamie happy and this was something he could give her. That didn’t make it his place to do so, however. He worried he’d ruined it again.

“Jamie,” Jared began seriously and Jamie’s lower lip started to protrude, “you know Captain Ackles has to work, right? He isn’t here to be at your beck and call and if,” and that was the magic word, because Jensen watched as Jamie’s smile returned and she straightened up, “he has time once in a while,” Jared paused to give Jensen a watered-down version of his daughter’s hairy eyeball, “to take you out here to see your friends, you are definitely going to have to help out on the boat.” And Jared had been on a roll up until that moment, now floundering over what Jamie could possibly do on the vessel safely.

“You mother is right,” Jensen spoke up. “I’ll be happy to take you out when I can, but I sure would appreciate if you could return the favor. Keeping the boat running is a lot of work. I could definitely use some help polishing the brass fixtures and things like that. Really detailed stuff.” Behind her, Jared was smiling again.

“I can do that,” Jamie agreed enthusiastically, “if you show me how. And maybe,” she said a little quieter, “you could teach me how to keep the engine running?”

Jared and Jensen were both surprised by the request. “I can show you a few things,” he promised her, figuring he’d find out later what her interest was in motors. It was the right answer, because her smile was as wide as her mother’s. “Now, what are you going to name your new friends?”

Jared laughed and began to unbutton his denim jacket. “Now you’ve done it,” he murmured to Jensen.

“What?” Jensen asked innocently as he stepped behind Jared and slipped the coat off of his shoulders, avoiding the preserver straps.

“Th-thank you,” Jared breathed as Jensen handed it back to him, fingers brushing lightly. They stared at each other for a moment before Jared ducked his head shyly and jammed his coat beside his daughter’s.

What Jensen had done became clear very quickly. Given carte blanche to name the harbor seals and their pups, Jamie started up a running dialogue that showed no signs of stopping half an hour later. Jared was smearing sunscreen on her arms and nose, but she didn’t miss a beat in her narrative. Each seal had a distinctive name and a unique storyline that matched the moniker Jamie had selected, like “Banana” for one of the females, based on the curved way she held herself as she rested on the haulout coupled with the “fact” that she also had a secret craving for the fruit, which she only ever got if a boater was careless and lost some overboard.

Jensen was enchanted with the depth of her imagination. It was an imagination that her mother had carefully tended and nurtured, given how easily she created her tales. He stole an occasional glance at Jared once in a while. At first, when Jamie had begun spinning her literary web, Jared had held himself stiffly, like he was afraid that Jamie was somehow annoying Jensen. However, as she continued to talk, with Jensen occasionally piping up to ask for additional details on some of the seals, Jared had started to relax and enjoy himself again, which had been Jensen’s goal from the start.

An hour later and Jamie probably would have continued talking if her stomach hadn’t rumbled loudly enough for both men to hear it. She blushed furiously and slapped a hand across her tummy. “Quiet,” she ordered her belly button. “I’m not through yet.”
“Sounds like someone is hungry,” Jensen said and got up from where he had been kneeling beside her. He flipped open his cooler and rummaged around. “I have the fixings for grilled cheese,” he announced to the little girl, “or tuna fish. What would you like?”

“I would like grilled cheese, please,” she chimed in. “Is that okay, Mommy?”

“That sounds like a great choice,” he told her.

“Thank you, Captain Ackles,” Jamie offered, unaware her mother was mouthing the same thing to Jensen behind her back. “Can I help?”

“Sure thing. While I heat up the pan, can you bring me the bread in the cupboard over there? It’s to the right of the steering wheel.” He jerked his head toward the cockpit and Jamie happily went in search of the item. “There are some rolls in there, too. Grab me two, please.”

“Found it,” she chirped and came back with her arms full. He plucked the bread out of her hands and set the rolls aside, buttering the slices generously, sprinkled some of his secret ingredient (bacon dust) over them and dropped the hastily made cheese sandwiches onto the sizzling pan. “This,” he said as pointed to the stove, “is one of the reasons I get teased about my boat being a yacht.”

Jamie let her eyes sweep from bow to stern before she pronounced, “It is a very nice boat. You shouldn’t let bullies teasing you make you feel bad ever.”

Jared leaned forward on the bench and took a look at the contents inside. He dropped his head, shoulders rising and falling rapidly with silent laughter. From where he was sitting, he couldn’t miss the upper layer of ice that showcased row after row of single serving milk cartons lined up like red and white soldiers at attention.

Jensen deftly slipped his spatula under the golden-brown sandwich and flipped it onto a plate. He held it out and Jamie grudgingly came forward to accept it, good humor returning when Jensen also handed her a pink straw with all kinds of crazy loops and whorls to it. She took her plate and drink and sat down on the stool Jensen had set up, so she could eat and observe the seals at the same time.

Jensen neatly slid his spatula under the golden-brown sandwich and flipped it onto a plate. He held it out and Jamie grudgingly came forward to accept it, good humor returning when Jensen also handed her a pink straw with all kinds of crazy loops and whorls to it. She took her plate and drink and sat down on the stool Jensen had set up, so she could eat and observe the seals at the same time.

Toasting the pair of rolls, Jensen heaped them full of the lobster meat he had brought along and plated them up. He brought them and a few napkins – jammed under his arm – over to where Jared was keeping an eye on his daughter. The omega was surprised when Jensen handed him the food, which didn’t sit well with him. He had hoped that Jared would expect Jensen to take care of him, too.

*Because he’s a guest,* his conscience reminded him, *and nothing more. Right?*
“You shouldn’t have,” Jared began while his stomach audibly disagreed.

“Mm hmm,” Jensen mumbled, taking a bite of his lobster roll to keep from saying something he maybe shouldn’t. He handed the younger man a napkin and whispered, “There’s water, soda and juice under all the milk if you’d like something to drink.”

Chewing quickly, Jared covered his mouth and murmured gratefully, “Thank you for that.”

“It was nothing,” Jensen tried to brush it off. “Besides,” he carried on, “I should be apologizing to you.”

Jared cocked his head, genuinely puzzled.

“I shouldn’t have made that offer to Jamie about coming out here without talking to you first. I really didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that,” he rambled on, feeling his face grow hot. He’d spent years commanding others and Jared set him back on his heels like a raw recruit with one look. “I’ve never spent much time with children and I spoke before I thought it through.” Jensen wasn’t sure how long he might have carried on if Jared hadn’t placed his free hand around Jensen’s forearm. The tentative touch froze Jensen in place.

“It’s okay,” Jared assured him. “I know you weren’t trying to usurp my authority or anything. And I appreciate you coming up with something she could do to pay you back. I just want her to learn to give and take, you know?”

“I get it,” Jensen said, “but thanks for giving me a pass after my snafu.”

Jared chuckled and was about to say something when the annoying and distinctive sound of Jamie sucking her milk carton dry was impossible to ignore. “Want another one?” he teased his daughter.

She frowned at him, mouth opening for what Jensen was certain would be a scathing retort (or as scathing as a child as sweet as Jamie was capable of making), but instead of words, her mouth kept widening until she scrunched up her eyes with a jaw-cracking yawn.

“Tired, baby?” Jared asked, setting his plate aside and going over to kneel next to her. Jamie reluctantly nodded her head in defeat.

“Why don’t you rest for a little while?” Jensen suggested. “Your friends certainly are,” he indicated the harbor seals. “I’ve got that berth in the bow. You can stretch out and catch a few winks.” Getting up before dawn, it was no surprise she was tuckered out.

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Jared agreed.

“They’ll still be here when you get back,” Jensen promised her when he saw her sleepy reluctance to abandon her station. “In fact, after they nap, they’ll be diving and fishing.”

That apparently sealed the deal. Jamie asked him where she could clean her dishes, which Jensen assured her wasn’t necessary.

“I’m only going to bring them back to the pub and use the dishwasher there,” he explained as he put them, along with his, in a smaller, empty chest.

“Is the berth next to the engine?” she asked him. When Jensen nodded, she turned to her mother and pleaded, “Can Captain Ackles tuck me in?”

Jared bobbed his head up and down. “Sure,” he replied, slightly nonplussed.
Jensen was equally so, but he led her over to the hatch and went before her down the tiny ladder to help her manage it. When they walked (Jamie walked, Jensen shuffled because there wasn’t enough headroom for him to stand upright) past the engine, Jamie paused.

“You won’t forget to show me how you keep your boat running, right?” she reminded him.

“Sure, honey,” he promised her. “Why the interest in it? You want to be a mechanic?”

Jamie chewed on her lower lip in a gesture that was too reminiscent of her mother. “If you show me how you make it work, then I can help Mommy when our car sometimes doesn’t;” she slowly admitted. “He doesn't say it, but Mommy worries about it a lot. The way you explained it to me before, it’s like they’re the same, right?”

“It is pretty much the same,” he agreed, stroking the back of her head and trying to ignore the sudden sting that stabbed at the corners of his eyes over the reality of a child trying to take care of their overworked parent. “Hurry up and nap,” he told her brightly, helping her climb into the cushioned berth, “so you can get back to your friends. I don’t think you told me all their names yet.”

“Okay,” she yawned, lids fluttering like butterfly wings.

He pulled a blanket from his footlocker and shook it out over her. Below the waterline, it was cooler and he didn’t want her getting chilled. The lapping of the waves against the rocking hull was a soothing lullaby and she was asleep before Jensen turned away.

Walking by the engine, he rapped the cover with his knuckles, determined to figure out a way to get under their car’s hood. The two of them in an unreliable vehicle did not sit well with Jensen at all. He’d have to come up with some excuse, he told himself, as he walked back up onto the deck. He might have had more to plan, but the sight that greeted him made everything else white out.

He knew it was wrong, but since Jared wasn’t aware of his return, he studied the omega. Jared was stretched out on the bench, leaning back against the stern on bent arms. He’d shed his overshirt and lifejacket while Jensen had been gone, leaving him in only a navy t-shirt that had ridden high enough to reveal a glimpse of skin along his waist. His insanely long legs were sprawled wide, creating a tantalizing “v” the way they fell open. His head was tossed back, eyes closed and chocolate strands of his hair gently blew in the breeze. His throat was a long, seductive arch and Jensen found himself licking his lips nervously. Eventually feeling guilty for taking advantage of the unguarded moment, Jensen coughed and busied himself with making sure the latch to the hatch door was secured for a second, unnecessary time to announce his return.

Jared jolted upright, pulling his legs together and fussing with his messy hair. “She asleep?” he asked hesitantly.

“Out like a light,” Jensen assured him easily. He flipped up the cooler lid and plunged his hands into the ice, needling the cold to soothe his heated blood. He dug around for a bottle of water, shaking the ice shavings off of it. The droplets glinted like diamonds in the bright light. Holding it up high, he offered, “Want one?”

“Please,” Jared agreed, tugging his t-shirt down nervously.

“May I?” Jensen indicated the spot to the left of Jared as he handed off one of the water bottles.

Startled, Jared waved his hand over the bench. “Of course.”

They sat there, drinking and enjoying the relative silence together. The rhythmic slap of water and the creak of his boat were familiar and welcome. The sun, almost directly overhead, warmed
Jensen’s skin and the heat reminded him that if he didn’t get sunscreen on his face soon, he’d have a slew of new freckles to contend with. Locating the lotion, he unthinkingly reached across Jared to grab it. He didn’t know who was more surprised when Jared didn’t jump at the unintended contact.

Hastily dabbing a dollop along his nose and forehead, he caught Jared watching him. “Did I miss a spot?” he joked, laughing at his own, unintended usage of Jamie’s word for his freckles. “Not that your daughter would complain over a new addition or two.”

Jared’s generous mouth stretched wide in a mischievous smile. “No, she wouldn’t. Your spots are one of your best features according to her.”

“Really?” Jensen laughed, crossing his arms over his chest, biceps flexing as he did.

Jared’s gaze dropped to his arms before the omega turned away to study the stark coastline, with its craggy face littered with trees. “It’s so beautiful here, like nothing I’ve ever seen before,” he confessed. “It’s like the forest is being swept up by the sea.” And then he blushed. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “That sounded…” he fluttered a hand uselessly, “flighty.”

“Pretty accurate,” Jensen assured him. “Geologists refer to this kind of landscape as a ‘drowned coast’. The rising sea levels invaded the hills and valleys and mountains, turning them into bays and islands.”

Nibbling on the side of his mouth, Jared said, “’Drowned coast’, huh? Sounds very morose and Poe-like.”

“He was a New Englander, after all,” Jensen pointed out amiably.

“Still,” Jared continued with a shake of his head, “this is amazing.” He twisted around, staring at the rough cliff dotted with emerald pines.

Clearing his throat, Jensen began,

“*All I could see from where I stood*

*Was three long mountains and a wood;*

*I turned and looked the other way,*

*And saw three islands in a bay.*

*So with my eyes I traced the line*

*Of the horizon, thin and fine,*

*Straight around till I was come*

*Back to where I’d started from.*”

Almost too quiet to hear, Jared recited the next stanza.

“*’And all I saw from where I stood*

*Was three long mountains and a wood.*

*Over these things I could not see:*
They both studied each other for a silent moment, before Jared haltingly announced, ‘“Renascence’ by Edna St. Vincent Millay.” He kept staring at Jensen with an expression that was hard to gauge.

Jensen cleared his throat. “I know what you must be thinking.”

“Do you?” Jared breathed out.

“Mm hmm. You’re thinking ‘Why, C.K. Dexter Haven, you have unsuspected depth’,,” and he chuckled lamely when Jared simply continued to stare. Dropping his gaze to his feet, Jensen scuffed a sneaker against the deck with growing unease. “That’s a line from my favorite movie. The –”

“Philadelphia Story,” Jared finished for him. “Sorry for just staring like that. I can totally see the Cary Grant resemblance, but I never pictured him in a vintage Led Zeppelin t-shirt before.” And he hid a growing smile behind his long, slender fingers.

Jensen eyed his black shirt, needing a second to collect himself after hearing that Jared thought he looked like Cary Grant. Desperate for something to say as the silence stretched awkwardly between them, he blurted out, “So you like the film, too?”

“I love almost every part of it. Katharine Hepburn as the feisty omega who wanted a real partner in her life. Cary Grant as the troubled, but still-in-love alpha and Jimmy Stewart as the beta who gets inadvertently caught between them,” he smiled, balancing his half-full bottle on the deck and relaxing back against the bench. “The film was one of the first to break away from some of the traditional views of alpha/beta/omega dynamics. I mean, first of all, they make Tracy Lords a ‘released omega’.”

Jared hooked his fingers in the air when he used the outdated phrase regarding an omega who had been granted the right to break their alpha’s claim on them. Back in the ‘40s, only extreme abuse that could be proven was grounds for that rare status.

“Then they go so far as to imply she had been the one to actually choose the second alpha in her life, even if he was a status seeking jerk. And then,” Jared twisted back around to face Jensen, bending his left leg and tucking his ankle under his right thigh. Jensen didn’t fail to notice that the young man made sure not to get his sneaker on the cushion. “Her family alpha was absent from the household for a good chunk of the film, basically leaving Tracy’s omega mother in charge of her and Tracy’s little, alpha sister Dinah.”

“Yeah,” Jensen agreed, wedging his empty bottle under the bench and unconsciously mirroring Jared’s position, “her father was kind of a monumental dick, leaving his family for an omega dancer like he did.”

Jared’s enthusiasm flagged then. “Not like it wasn’t an alpha’s right to keep as many omegas as they might want back then. I guess the filmmakers couldn’t buck tradition too much. After all, there was the underlying implication throughout the movie how Tracy lost control when she drank and became a loose omega then and couldn’t recall her actions. An obvious allusion to omega heats.”

“Still,” Jensen pressed on, shifting to his right, one arm casually hooked over the stern rail, “Not very noble to abandon your family and then come back acting all high and mighty when said family had been forced to agree to unwanted scrutiny by the press all to keep his good name intact. And he even goes so far as to imply Tracy isn’t a true omega with the way she was behaving, like being one meant lying down like a doormat for any alpha to walk on.”
Jared played with a small rip in the left knee of his jeans and didn’t meet Jensen’s eyes. “Do you really feel like that?” he asked in a small voice.

“Absolutely,” Jensen replied immediately. Watching Jared, Jensen wondered what the omega thought of alphas in real life and used the film to press the question. “What about the ending? Do you think Tracy should have married Dexter instead of Jimmy Stewart’s beta reporter? It was awfully romantic the way he proposed to her. Very gallant when she needed a helping hand.”

“It was a wonderful, romantic gesture,” Jared nodded, bangs drifting into his eyes; Jensen had to resist the urge to brush them aside. “But I don’t think Connor loved her as much as Dexter did. He was just caught up in the moment of wanting to rescue her and confused about his own feelings for his photographer partner. But Tracy was passionate about Dexter,” Jared insisted, “and maybe afraid or ashamed of her omega nature for wanting him. She was trying really hard not to be typical – not to be her mother – that I think she kind of did drive a wedge between her and her alpha. He wanted to care for her and protect her and love her, but she made him feel like his instincts were wrong. He turned to alcohol to self-medicate because he believed that he had nowhere else to go. He was losing himself.”

“But what about the abuse?” Jensen pressed on, wanting to know how Jared might justify it and praying he didn’t think omegas deserved it.

He shrugged. “It was wrong that he shoved her that one time, but it was wrong of her not to consider what he was going through, too. Just because she didn’t want to be a typical omega didn’t give her the right to negate him being an alpha. His desires and instincts were equally as important.

“I think that’s why, in the end, Dexter was the right one for her,” Jared finished. “They had both learned to be patient and understanding with each other by the time the film wrapped up. She knew he wasn’t going to try and change her and she finally understood that him being an alpha didn’t make him like her father. She came to realize that he deserved to be respected not because he was an alpha, but because he was an honorable man; he’d earned the respect.”

Jared kind of ran out of steam then, cutting his eyes to the side. Meanwhile, Jensen was processing Jared’s opinions, secretly hopeful that he didn’t despise alphas for the centuries of domination that they had held over omegas. He let his head drop back, eyes falling shut, enjoying the peaceful feeling he got sitting beside Jared, the way it calmed his inner alpha like nothing else. He did pry them open when the sound of a plane cut through the calm. Squinting against the sun, Jensen tracked the contrail the jet left in its wake.

“What do you miss it?” Jared questioned him softly.

Jensen raised his head to regard the young omega. “Flying jets?” he countered. He might have said something about being in the Navy to the omega, but he had never mentioned being a pilot. For Jared to know that, he would have had to ask someone else about him. He grinned like an idiot when that sank in.

Jared had asked about him.

Jared nodded, raking his fingers through his locks, which framed his face in salty, dark curls.

“Sometimes,” Jensen answered honestly. “There’s nothing like flying. I had a good chunk of time in when the order came down to decommission the base here and I could have transferred, but it seemed like the universe was trying to tell me something important.”

He wondered if he sounded crazy to the omega, but Jared was looking at him in that thoughtful
manner of his. “Flighty, huh?”

Jared shook his head. “Sounds like you were listening to your instincts. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Yeah?” Jensen exhaled, sliding over a tiny bit.

“Can I ask you something?” Jared wondered, suddenly shy again.

“You can ask me anything,” Jensen countered. “Anything at all.”

“Why did you decide to pursue a career in the military?” The question was soft and uncertain.

Jensen took a deep breath and let his gaze roam over the water. When he took too long to answer, Jared nervously offered, “Never mind. I shouldn’t have asked.”

Jensen reached over and laid his hand on top of Jared’s, not holding him in place, but merely touching. “I don’t mind. Really,” he assured the uncertain omega. “It’s just that no one’s ever really asked me before.”

Without realizing it, Jensen left his hand where it was. “I’m from Texas,” he admitted, drawing a surprised gasp from Jared. “And I’m the oldest alpha offspring in my family. My alpha is the head of large company that her father founded. It was kind of assumed that I would take over someday, since I wore the mantel of the heir apparent. But it wasn’t what I wanted. I felt trapped and boxed in and then, one day, I realized I didn’t have to be. I could walk away from it all.”

“Yeah,” Jared agreed. “You could.”

And Jensen knew the implication of that statement. As an alpha, he could buck tradition a hell of a lot easier than a beta or omega could.

“It still cost me my family,” he confessed, noting the genuine concern that softened Jared’s expression. “Needless to say, they were not pleased with me and even less so when they found out I had chosen a military path for myself. They equated military service with being uneducated and underprivileged. Like it was a career for somebody not smart enough for college, you know?”

“But you didn’t decide to do it because you knew it would upset your family. There’s more to it than that,” Jared insisted, leaning forward slightly.

Jensen raised an eyebrow at him, surprised to be caught out. “No,” he admitted, “it wasn’t teenage rebellion. I,” he paused, trying to collect himself, “admired the discipline that the military exuded. I found that air of control intoxicating. That you could rise in the ranks, have servicemen and women under you that relied on your leadership and judgement. To serve with people who implicitly trusted you because you’d proven yourself to them. And standing up to protect this country.” He laughed ruefully. “I know it has its faults; its not as progressive as other places, but it is improving, even if it’s at a glacial rate. Knowing that I was protecting something worthwhile seemed like everything to me at the time. And for a lot of years, it was.”

“But what changed? You didn’t want that anymore?”

Growing thoughtful, Jensen shook his head. “It wasn’t enough anymore, to be honest. I felt like there was a hole inside of me and my job didn’t fill it. So when the word came down to shutter the place, I decided it was time for a change for me, too.

“You know Kim,” Jensen continued, hand still resting atop Jared’s. They rocked with subtle motion of the boat. “She’d fallen in love with the area and maybe with a certain someone here, too. She
decided to set down roots and asked me to join her.”

“O-oh,” Jared stuttered, trying to take his hand back. “You and her and her partner are…together?”

Jensen threw back his head and laughed. “Not like that,” he assured Jared, trying to coax him into leaving his hand where it was, but not holding it in place. “Have you met Kim? You know how possessive an alpha she is. She doesn't share.” And then, sensing it was important that Jared understand him, he said in a lower tone, “Neither do I. It’s not in my nature.”

Jared swallowed, throat visibly working with the effort. “You don’t?” The question was whisper quiet.

“I’ve never been one to share what’s mine,” he said. Then, toning himself down, he continued, “So, almost six years ago, my life changed again. This place got in my blood,” he broadly gestured to the sea and sky with his free hand, “and I couldn’t see leaving.” Noticing Jared’s rueful smile, Jensen asked, “What’s so funny?”

“It’s just,” the omega began awkwardly, “that’s when my life changed, too.”

“Jamie,” Jensen replied softly, rubbing a circle over the back of Jared’s hand with his thumb.

“Jamie,” Jared agreed, briefly flicking his eyes toward the open hatchway.

“Do you want to talk about it? We don’t have to,” he added in a rush, not wanting Jared to feel pressured in the least.

“It’s okay,” Jared shrugged. “Not much of a story there. Just one that I’m sure as a bartender you’ve heard a thousand times before. Dumb omega fell for an alpha.”

Jensen bristled at the self-deprecating way Jared referred to himself, “Hey now,” he admonished the younger man, frowning.

“It’s true, Jensen,” he disagreed and the alpha was torn between arguing with Jared and being elated over the way Jared had said his given name. “I was eighteen and stupid.” Lowering his eyes, Jared added, “And he was my English professor during my first year in college.”

Jensen had to clamp down to trap the growl that wanted to slip free. The power imbalance was already weighted toward the alpha in their society, but to take advantage of a young, impressionable student was unconscionable.

“Dumb, huh?” Jared huffed, taking a chance to meet Jensen’s eyes.

“You, too,” he corrected Jared. “He had a responsibility as your teacher and he betrayed that duty.”

“I should have known better,” Jared sighed, “but it was so exciting being at school. I was the first omega in my family to go to college. And you know how few omegas manage to do that in Texas.”

“I thought I heard a familiar drawl to some of your words,” Jensen grinned.

“Yeah,” Jared admitted,还没有来得及说，他的笑容就消失了。他在想，一个学生成为教授的顾问，这，不是一个好选择。

“Me, too,” he corrected Jared. “He said I had real promise and asked me if he could be my advisor. I-I thought I was the luckiest omega around, having a professor take me under his wing especially because I wanted to teach. At first, it was wonderful.”

Jensen forced his touch to stay light on Jared’s hand, but inside he was seething with irrational jealousy. Intellectually, Jensen knew an alpha had been with Jared before. But it was another thing to
“We talked about our favorite books and he really seemed to listen to me. No one had ever done that before,” Jared paused with an earnest, almost pleading, expression, wanting Jensen to get it.

“I know how it is to want someone to understand you for you,” Jensen assured him. He’d searched for that himself over the years and come up empty-handed each time.

“Like that tired cliché goes, one thing led to another,” Jared confessed, turning away. “I thought he loved me, so when my heat was due, he convinced me not to take emergency suppressants. I had been debating about going on the regular ones, but the process is long and difficult to get a prescription. Texas legislation keeps adding addendum after addendum to the law, circumventing the federal statute without actually violating it. He said…” and Jared paused to gnaw at his lower lip. Jensen kept up the steady motion of his thumb against the omega’s skin, providing what he hoped was comfort and not pressure.

“Geez,” Jared breathed out, ruffling his bangs in the process. “It sounds so stupid to say it aloud now.”

“You don’t have to say anything to me you don’t want to, Jared,” he promised him.

Meeting Jensen’s gaze with his own watery green one, Jared smiled. It was small and almost sickly, but it was genuine. “I don’t mind with you.”

With his other hand, he rubbed his mouth absently. “Eric said that he wanted to experience my heat. He insisted he’d never been with an omega in heat before. He only knew it was intense and passionate and,” Jared laughed hollowly, “that if I really loved him, I’d trust him to take care of me during it. He swore he’d wear a knot band and not tie with me. He told me he wanted to see my ‘true self’ and I fell for it.

“A month later, I’m throwing up every morning. At first, he accused me of cheating on him and I was destroyed; I would never be unfaithful,” Jared swore. “I argued with him that there was no other alpha smell on me but his and eventually he relented. He acted all distraught, telling me that the band broke while we were together and he was devastated for having failed me. I believed him.”

Jensen didn’t have anything to say to that. It wasn’t impossible for a band to snap (and that was one of the reasons he made sure to check the integrity of his before any intimate encounters), but it was extremely rare.

“And had it?” he finally prodded Jared, when the omega was quiet.

“Don’t know. Heats are…kinda intense,” he said, face flushing pink. “I don’t remember.”

And Jensen did know, only not firsthand. He’d seen his fair share of porn and heard others talk about what it was like to knot with an omega in heat (“It’s like they really are on fire, Jensen,” his little brother had confessed to him once). An omega’s heat was also the reason why they had been subjugated for centuries.

Twice a year, omegas suffered through an intense mating drive that rendered them all but incoherent. At some point during the 14th or 15th century, alphas had moved from the shunning and sequestering of omegas ‘in season’ to decreeing that omegas were more animal than human. They had all their rights stripped away (for their own good, the ruling classes decided, since they were too unstable to decide anything for themselves). Only alphas could take omegas as mates, since betas were deemed not strong enough to keep one under control. Because only omegas could have multiple litters, the
powers that be successfully argued that that was their sole purpose in life and that they did not need formal education or to work anywhere outside the alpha’s household, demoted to brood mare. The final, degrading act perpetrated against them had been collaring. That particular institution had endured until the last century.

“In retrospect,” Jared’s gentle voice broke through his distressed musings, “I don’t think he had used one.”

Jensen squeezed Jared’s hand, hating that the omega had had his trust violated like that when he was at his most vulnerable and should have been protected. The safest place for him was supposed to be in his alpha’s arms.

Whipping his head back and forth to clear the hair from his eyes, Jared smiled. “But I’m not sorry about her,” he confided, voice pitched low and secret. “Jamie is the best part of me and I’ll never be sorry for having her in my life.”

“She’s wonderful, Jared,” Jensen told him sincerely, eyes crinkling as he grinned.

“Eric didn’t think so,” Jared confessed, barely audible. Jensen took a gamble and scooted closer, knowing Jared didn’t want to chance his daughter hearing a word of this.

“He didn’t claim you or acknowledge her.” It wasn’t a question.

Jared chuckled, but there was no joy in the sound. “Marriage wasn’t legal for us back then. Eric promised that he would claim me if I really wanted it, but he said he didn’t want to be a party to that antiquated system. He told me he wanted the best for me and that he was certain that legal marriage was on the horizon.” The wind kept pushing his hair into his eyes and Jared paused to swat at it ineffectually. “And I bought the line,” he huffed. “I agreed that marriage would be better for all of us,” and Jared rubbed his stomach, lost in the memory. “That’s when he dropped the first bombshell on me.”

“What?” Jensen asked, leaning in.

“He explained that if anyone on campus found out he had impregnated me, the dean would probably force Eric to claim me or he’d be fired. He said how that was not what either of us wanted and we shouldn’t let anyone take away my rights like that. God,” he chuckled sadly, wiping subtly at his eyes, “I was such a fool.”

“Hey now,” Jensen soothed him, brushing his thumb over Jared’s bone-white knuckles.

“So I said we should keep quiet about us. He pretended like it was a hardship, but looking back now, I know he was relieved,” Jared admitted.

“You didn’t say anything?” the alpha prodded.

“Nope. Obviously, I couldn’t hide the pregnancy for very long and, sure enough, I did get called before the dean. But my classwork was impeccable. I know they wanted to, but there were no legal grounds for them to kick me out. And I kept Eric’s secret.”

“Did he help at all?” Jensen’s heart ached for that Jared from the past, alone and probably overwhelmed by everything.

“Nope. Of course, he spun it that he couldn’t give the dean the slightest reason to suspect his part in it. He promised me that as soon as he got tenure, things would get better. Then he could help out, because they wouldn’t be able to fire him.” Jared blinked his eyes rapidly. “I believed him. I wanted
to believe him because he was all that I had.”

“Your family?” Jensen didn’t even know how to finish that sentence.

Jared shook his head sadly. “I was on my own after that summer. So I told myself that all I had to do was hang on until marriage became legal or Eric got tenure – whichever came first. I could do it.

“When Jamie was born right before Thanksgiving, I had this fleeting hope that Eric would take one look at her and claim me after all,” Jared confessed. “Marriage could wait.”

“You would have let him?” Jensen wasn’t sure how to take that, given how independent Jared was.

“Jensen,” he confessed, “at that point I was still stupidly in love with Eric. I would have trusted him to claim me and not take advantage of the bond. In hindsight, I suppose I dodged a bullet. Or maybe a collar. He wasn't worth it. But he simply told me after seeing Jamie for the first time and scenting her status that that was even more reason to wait, since he would have to be responsible for two omegas. And, again, I believed him.”

“You were only in your second year of school.” Jared nodded. “How in the world did you manage? Did he at least help?”

“Eric gave me a little money and promises of a marriage in some nebulous future, but that was it. I got lucky that the school nurse who treated me after I had Jamie was a sympathetic beta. While she couldn’t offer me any help directly, she managed to put me in touch with the Omega Network. And I needed help badly.”

“What happened?”

“Well, the dean couldn’t boot me for being a mother, but he could kick me out of the dorms. I was living with a non-student at that point, in clear violation of university policy,” Jared replied stiffly.

“Bastard,” Jensen all but growled, holding tighter to Jared’s hand.

“I held out a little hope that Eric would step in, but he didn’t. The Omega Network helped me find affordable housing with other omegas close to campus. They set me up with a few job interviews and even helped me get a prescription for daily suppressants. I would have really been lost without them,” Jared explained.

“But how did you manage with classes and Jamie?” Jensen was amazed at Jared’s resilience.

“It wasn’t easy, but all of us living together worked out a schedule to watch each other’s children.”

“So you went to school, held down a job, raised your daughter and helped the others care for their kids? God, Jared, you’re amazing,” he said fervently.

“I…uh…” he stuttered, embarrassment staining his face a deep pink. His hair tumbled into his eyes again, but he was too flustered to do anything about it. “I just did what I had to,” he finally said.

“Marriage became legal my final year in school and even though I knew he didn’t love us, I still gave Eric a final chance. He tried to put me off, saying if we waited until he got tenure, then our future would be completely secure. But he had stopped looking me in the eye the year before and I could count on one hand the number of times he had held Jamie since she’d been born.”

“How could he not hold his own child? How could he not hold Jamie?” Jensen was incredulous. It was literally unfathomable to him.
“He told me it wasn’t worth the scandal. If another professor got a whiff of my child on him, it would jeopardize everything. I think,” Jared’s laugh was brittle and cracked, “that was probably the last, honest thing he said to me. Kinda fitting it would be the last thing we ever talked about. I stopped trying to fit him into our lives after that. I knew it was just Jamie and me. J2,” he grinned. “My final year in college, I started researching what kind of teaching jobs I would be qualified for with my education degree and status. Preschool, daycare and kindergarten openings were pretty accessible for an omega, but Hyde was one of the few willing to let me teach older students, which was what I had studied for, what I wanted to do.”

Jensen looked at him warmly. “I’m sure glad they did. Still, it must have been scary to pack up and leave everything you knew.”

“It was hard for us to leave our housemates. We’d cobbled together a family and I miss them,” Jared declared sadly, but his face hardened a beat later. It was an expression that Jensen didn’t believe belonged there and he wished he could erase it. “They’re the only thing I miss about Texas, though. I didn’t want Jamie to grow up there and deal with what I had to. I mean, I know our president has made some great strides during her two terms, but she’s been a lame duck for the last year. And while I really hope that the Democratic nominee wins, and not just because it would be amazing for one of us to break that glass ceiling, but because the Republican alpha scares me, you know?” Jared looked at him earnestly and then his face paled. “Uh, I mean,” he babbled, hair obscuring his eyes as he turned his face away, “it’s not that I’m against alphas…” His hands fluttered like wounded birds.

“He scares me, too,” Jensen told him, cutting Jared off before he worked himself up into a ball of nerves over potentially having insulted him. “He comes across as an extremist, and those kinds of people are always terrifying. They need the fear. They thrive on it. They spread it like an infection.” Jensen practically heard Jared’s heartbeat calm down with each declaration he made.

“Folks back in Texas,” the omega eventually continued, hands stilling with the understanding it was safe to talk politics, “are really getting worked up over this election. A lot of hateful, backward-thinking things are being said down there. Coming here,” Jared glanced at the endless, blue sky, “was like coming up for air. I could breathe again.” He indicated the sea with one hand. Jensen still held the other loosely, feeling a thrill of warmth when Jared squeezed back. “Thank you for bringing us out here today and showing us what it’s like.”

Jensen shifted closer and finally dared to tuck a few strands of Jared’s unruly hair behind an ear. He traced his finger along Jared’s jawline, studying the younger man’s face intensely. “For showing you what is like?” He needed Jared to say it.

Jared didn’t pull away from the gentle touch. Swallowing hard, he nearly whispered, “For showing us what it can be like to let our guard down. For showing us what it means to feel safe.”

Jensen’s hand trailed down the omega’s elegant throat, pausing to rub his thumb against the wildly beating pulse thrumming against his fingers. He was aching to know what Jared smelled like.

“Why,” Jared brought his head nearer and spoke like a mind reader, “haven’t you scented me? Don’t you want to?”

Trying to keep his touch light when everything inside him was clamoring to take and claim, Jensen told him. “I do want to very much. Since that first day, I’ve been dying to,” and Jared blushed again, “but I was honoring your privacy.” Behind them, the seals were waking up and starting to dive into the water, some less silently than others.

“I-I want you to,” Jared confessed. Jensen didn’t miss the nervousness there, but he heard the excitement, too.
“With all the salt in the air, I’d have to get closer,” Jensen rasped, suddenly overwhelmed with what Jared was offering him. Superficially, scenting another revealed their status, but if taken carefully and slowly, it ran deeper than that. Other than sex, Jensen didn’t think anything was more intimate between two people.

“Yes,” Jared replied shakily, “you would.” And he tipped his head to the side, inviting Jensen in.

Licking his lips, Jensen pushed right up against Jared’s side, feeling the omega’s comforting body heat warm him. He held onto Jared’s hand, but slowly buried the other in Jared’s beautiful mane. Cradling his skull gently, Jensen encouraged Jared to let his head fall back further. It was a vulnerable position and one that required trust. Jensen’s heart began to pound in earnest when, after only a second’s hesitation, Jared gifted him with that as he exposed himself completely.

Jensen lowered his head, nosing along the shell of Jared’s ear, teasing them both with his hot, moist breath, still not inhaling. Jared squirmed in his seat, free hand flailing until it slapped against Jensen’s chest. The omega wound his fingers in the material of his t-shirt and made a fist, trying to tug the alpha closer. Jensen continued their torture by dragging his nose lower, into the damp curls at the nape of Jared’s neck, breath dancing against Jared’s heated skin, needing to rise up onto one knee to get a better angle. He planned to take his time and savor the moment for as long as he could.

It was what sounded like “please, alpha” that was Jensen’s undoing.

Twisting his head, Jensen mouthed along the salty skin of Jared’s throat and breathed him in for the first time. The warm, sweet aroma of spice that had wafted around him when he’d first walked into the pub was what Jensen initially encountered. A little like vanilla and a little like coconut, Jensen savored it, full lips catching on the jut of Jared’s collarbone. The soft moan that escaped the omega only spurred him on. Pushing past the first layer, Jensen nibbled back up along a rigid tendon standing out against Jared’s neck, searching for what lay beneath.

He finally caught the whisper of something heavier – the perfume of a rare, exotic flower that only bloomed at midnight like a secret. It was ripe and lush and almost narcotic the way Jensen craved more once he caught its signature. He’d let go of Jared’s hand and wrapped his fingers around the curve of his shoulder instead, urging Jared closer. The omega floundered for a moment until he snaked his suddenly free arm up Jensen’s broad chest to drape around his neck. As Jensen continued to drag his open mouth against the underside of his strong chin, Jared croaked, “Can I?”

Jensen pulled him flush against his body, smiling into Jared’s skin when the omega trembled in his grasp. “Yes,” he groaned, guiding Jared’s head to his throat. Licking the line of his left ear, Jensen exhaled, “Tell me what you smell.” He’d meant to sound firm, commanding, but he was merely a supplicant before the omega.

With an almost delicate, hesitant gesture, Jared pressed his face under the curve of Jensen’s jaw. Jensen tried not to shiver as warm puffs of air caressed his skin when Jared scented him.

“Autumn leaves,” Jared murmured, “and applewood smoke.” The omega’s long fingers brushed teasingly against the short hair along the base of Jensen’s skull. Jared unexpectedly surged upward, leaving no room between them. He practically growled when the tight, sharp peaks of Jared’s nipples grazed his chest, sending zings along his spine like from an unshielded wire. Jared’s heated breath caused goosebumps to erupt along his arms, despite the blazing heat from the overhead sun. “Safe,” Jared finally panted. “You smell like home.”

A loud splash behind the stern startled them both. From the corner of his eye, Jensen saw the silvery head of a harbor seal break the surface, watching them inquisitively with fathomless, black eyes. Startled by the sound, Jared turned in its direction. His lips grazed Jensen’s in the process and the
alpha held still, unwilling to force Jared. The omega didn’t move.

Emboldened, Jensen nipped at Jared’s lower lip, each heavy exhale dancing hotly across the blood-warmed, tender flesh. Jared gasped sharply and Jensen teased his tongue at the edges of the inviting entrance, tasting Jared. Jared sighed happily and Jensen all but pulled the pliant omega onto his lap, slipping his tongue inside at the shocked moan the change in position elicited from Jared. The omega yanked him tighter, twining his arms about his neck insistently.


Jensen dove back in and tickled the roof of Jared’s mouth with his tongue, memorizing every ridge and bump he discovered like a cartographer. Suddenly as clumsy and eager as a boy, Jensen tried to pose Jared’s long limbs around him better. He wanted to sink inside him with a desire that threatened to burn him up from the inside out. Pulling out, Jensen caressed Jared’s neck with one hand while he urged the omega to cant his hips against his own with a firm press against the small of his back with the other. Jensen dove in when he saw the sweaty skin of Jared’s neck before him. He nipped and tugged there, finally sucking on the omega’s Adam’s apple like a starving man.

A weighted scent pervaded his senses. While it made Jensen’s mouth water, a small voice in his head screamed that it meant Jared’s body was overwhelming his suppressants. Jensen slipped one hand down to catch the omega’s thigh, hiking it higher against his hip, allowing them to rub their most intimate parts against each other. But that insistent, inner voice reminded him that it was his duty to protect his omega, not take advantage of him. It wasn’t the right time or the right place yet. It was too soon for Jared. With a strength Jensen didn’t know he owned, he ripped himself away from Jared’s sugared lips.

Chests heaving, the two men stared at each other.

“Jensen?” Jared whined, voice wrecked and eyes blown with desire tinged uncertainty.

Jensen combed a hand through Jared’s sweaty hair, trying to catch his breath and reassure Jared at the same time.

“Jared,” Jensen began, voice gravel ragged, “I—”

“Mommy?” a tiny voice squeaked in surprise and both men whipped their heads toward the hatchway, open and forgotten all this time. “You can’t do that!”
“You can’t do that,” Jamie huffed again, pushing back her hair. Almost half of her dark curls had pulled free of her ponytail while she’d slept and they were matted against her face in crazy ringlets, the lopsided tail askew. Jensen kept his hands on Jared and the trembles that ran through the young omega were different from a heartbeat before. Jensen didn’t need to scent him to understand that.

“I-I can’t do what?” Jared asked his daughter, burying the worst of his shock as he tried to compose himself, hands smoothing down his shirt. Jensen mourned the loss of skin he’d seen.

Jamie marched over, righteous, almost-five-year-old indignation bubbling off of her. She jammed her fists on her hips and glowered at both of them. Jensen wasn’t sure if he should laugh or actually be intimidated by her serious frown.

“Captain Ackles, I am disappointed in you.” The words had to be a mimicry of what Jensen thought must have been the worst punishment her mother bestowed on Jamie.

“Me?” Jensen wondered, off-balance in front of the tiny omega.

“How could you let my mommy do that?” she grumbled, turning back to fix her stern glare on her mother.

Jensen swallowed dryly. He tried to calm his still-pounding heart and didn’t know if Jared was expecting him to offer up an explanation to the formidable, pint-sized force currently giving them both stink eye. He admittedly had no experience with children save for memories of his own childhood and he didn’t think that was going to do it. Sneaking a peek at Jared, he noticed the omega was equally uncertain, fussing with his lank hair with one hand and dragging the other slowly across his swollen, well-kissed lips. Jensen lost himself for a second, remembering their sweet taste. He rubbed his knuckles against the omega’s flank without realizing it. Jared flashed him a look of confusion and yearning in equal measure. Jensen winked; he hoped it was reassuring before facing Jamie.

“I –” he began only to have Jamie roll her eyes and drop to her knees. He leaned over as she rummaged under the bench and jerked back when she popped up like a jack-in-the-box. In her hands was Jared’s lifejacket.

Shaking the discarded equipment at her mother, she demanded, “Did you learn how to swim when I was napping? I don’t think so,” she snarked. Jensen had to quickly hide his traitorous mouth behind a hand. She sounded too much like he had when he’d first made Jared put it on.

The little mimic.

“You can’t take it off, Mommy,” she insisted, waving the orange thing at Jared. “Captain Ackles can’t hold you all the time. He has to drive the boat, too. Don’t you?”

Flustered, Jensen half-heartedly bobbed his head up and down. He was sure he looked as stupid as those toys with the oversized faces. “That’s true, Jared,” he finally said, deciding discretion was the better part of valor. “I can’t hold you all the time.”

The omega’s mouth opened in shock before he narrowed his tilted eyes menacingly at Jensen.

“See?” Jamie nodded, ponytail swinging crookedly. “Now put this back on right now, Mommy Tristan Padalecki.”
Jared accepted the return of the flotation device, still stunned by the turn of events. Jensen whistled lowly. “All three names. You’re in big trouble now,” he said quietly as he leaned over to help Jared slip the orange monstrosity back on under Jamie’s keen eye.

“Don’t think you’re not, Captain Ackles,” she corrected him, little finger waggling. Apparently, that whole “little pitchers” saying had legs. “You’re supposed to make sure Mommy stays safe. I know you were holding him so he didn’t fall in, but what if you had to do something boaty and let him go? He could have fallen in.”

Jensen would have laughed if not for Jamie’s expression at the end of her mini-reprimand. There was genuine worry in her blue eyes.

“Honey,” he paused with his hands around Jared’s waist, “I was just about to tell your mother we had to stop because what we were doing was too dangerous. He wasn’t ready for it yet,” Jensen finished, flicking his eyes toward the omega and hoping Jared heard the meaning behind the words. Jared dipped his head to the side, wisps of hair tumbling across his forehead. He studied Jensen, wetting his flushed lips and finally nodded.

“Too soon,” Jared almost whispered.

“Too soon,” Jensen agreed, smile deepening.

“And grown-ups think they’re so smart,” Jamie sighed, lips pushed out like a duckling’s bill. Before she could say another word, a harbor seal popped up near the starboard side and her eyes widened to the size of quarters.

“It’s Spotsy,” she whispered loudly. Slowly, she crept to the side and watched the mammal, while the animal returned the favor. Her world had narrowed down to only the harbor seal, relegating Jensen and Jared to background noise at best.

Taking advantage of the distraction, the alpha leaned into Jared, ostensibly tightening the waist strap of the preserver. He brushed his lips against the other’s ear and breathed out, “She’s right. I can’t hold you all the time.” He pressed a quick kiss there. “Even if I want to,” he admitted as he drew back. Twin splotches of pink blossomed on Jared’s cheeks and he delighted in the omega’s bashful glow. Making sure Jamie was still entranced with her friend, he boldly smoothed some of Jared’s hair aside and, for a second, the younger man moved into the touch. The gesture spoke volumes.

The rest of their trip was far more uneventful than the start. By the time Jensen pulled up anchor, Jamie had identified the rest of her friends to Jensen, eaten a second sandwich and had another carton of milk without batting an eye. The little chatterbox, satisfied that her mother was properly outfitted again, sat beside him on the ride back to the marina and was content to relive the entire trip for him in exacting detail. Jensen chuckled as her tiny hands flew all over the place like starling wings. She occasionally paused long enough for Jared to interject an observation she might have missed, but just barely.

Stealing glances every once in a while, Jensen loved how genuinely Jared was invested in his daughter. Not only did he never grow tired of her endless stream of questions and self-professed facts, he encouraged her nature, subtly directing her to additional questions and answers. Although he had never seen the omega in a classroom, Jensen believed Jared possessed all the traits of a great instructor. Hyde was lucky they had managed to get him.

They’re not the only one who’s lucky, he admitted to himself, still tasting Jared on his lips.

Far faster than he would have liked, their home port came into view. Slowing down, Jensen called
out, “Jamie, can you help me?”

“Sure,” the girl exclaimed, popping up at his side. “What can I do?”

“You see those orange balls over by the starboard side?” he jerked his head to the right.

“Uh huh. Do you use those to play with the seals?” she asked hopefully.

Jensen couldn’t stop the grin that spread across his face. “I never thought of that. We’ll have to try one time and see if your friends are interested. Those are the boat fenders.”

“Like a car fender?”

“Pretty much,” he agreed. “They absorb the shock of banging into the slip and make sure the side of the boat doesn’t get dinged when its docked. Can you toss ‘em overboard for me, honey? I’d really appreciate it.”

“Absolutely,” she beamed, happy to help. She carefully picked up each one, gave their rope a tug and then flipped them over the side. “How’s that?”

“Perfect. You make a great first mate,” he told her as he adjusted the wheel to ease them into his slip.

“Did you hear that, Mommy?” She all but skipped back over to her mother. Jensen could tell she wanted to run, but she was following his safety rules to the letter.

“I did, baby,” Jared replied, kissing her on the top of her head and undoing her tragic ponytail. “Looks like you have a knack for the nautical life.” He finger-combed her windblown hair.

“I’m not naughty,” she denied indignantly. “At least, not today.”

“Nautical. It means things having to do with ships or sailors,” he explained between chuckles. “And you’re right,” he said. “You’re not naughty…today.”

Jamie huffed and shuffled closer to Jensen. “I’m only naughty when I get caught,” she informed him seriously.

“I bet that doesn’t happen too often, does it?” Jensen whispered to her.

“Nope,” she giggled before slapping her hands over her mouth to try and keep the laughter inside. Her perfect dimples appeared, like little punctuation marks indented in her round cheeks.

“What are you two up to?” Jared called out, sounding serious. One look at his face, however, and Jensen knew he was playing along.

“Nothing,” Jensen answered with a shake of his head while tying off the boat.

“Nothing,” Jamie echoed, sounding as innocent as could be until she bunched up her shoulders with restrained glee.

“Mm hmm,” Jared hummed.

“That’s Mommy’s ‘I don’t trust you’ sound,” Jamie whispered hotly into Jensen’s ear.

“Good to know,” he thanked her with a pat to her back.

Jamie grinned up at him. “Us nauticals have to stick together,” she informed him sagely. He swung
himself onto the dock and held out a hand to the girl, easily lifting her up to him.

As he untied her vest, Jensen noted that she held her hands straight out and wobbled. “Wow. The ground is moving,” she declared.

“It can feel like that for a while,” Jensen explained to her, “after you’ve spent the day on the water, especially the first time.”

“That’s wicked awesome,” Jamie declared.

“She’s picking up the patois fast,” Jensen remarked quietly as he pulled Jared onto the dock and steadied him with a hand to the small of his back.

“My little parrot,” Jared replied, with no small amount of pride in his voice. “She doesn’t miss much.”

As Jensen stepped behind him to help him take off his life-preserver, he took advantage of the moment to brush his nose along the base of Jared’s neck, inhaling what he’d been freely offered, before planting a soft kiss to the sweat-damp curls there. “Neither do I,” Jensen informed him lowly. He had to bite back a groan when Jared, still swaying from his time on the water, leaned into him. The curve of his perfect ass fit snugly against his groin and he clutched Jared’s lean, swimmer’s hips in his hands reflexively.

Jensen pressed forward, unable to hide his growing arousal. “You smell like the sea,” he exhaled in Jared’s ear. “Salt, sun and joy.”

“You don’t have to hold him anymore,” Jamie called out, “’cause we’re not on the water now.”

Jared made to step away, but Jensen held him gently in place. “What if I just like holding him?” he asked Jamie in all seriousness. Jared stilled beneath his hands. He’d never been as worried about someone else’s opinion as he was in this moment.

She made her “thinking face” as she considered his question. After a few seconds, she announced, “That’s okay, too. Mommy is nice to cuddle with. If he says it’s okay,” she added.

“Only if he says it’s okay,” Jensen confirmed. “That’s the only way I want to.” His eyes closed when Jared brushed his hand against Jensen’s thigh.

“It’s okay when you do it,” Jared sighed.

Jensen’s mouth quirked up on one side, gratified he had permission, but saddened by the implication of past, unwanted touches. “Thank you,” he breathed softly into Jared’s hair.

Life-vest in one hand, Jared turned in Jensen’s hold. Their hips rubbed against each other with the motion and both men were affected. “Thank you,” Jared replied, staring into Jensen’s eyes.

It was different for Jensen to have to actually look up at someone he was romantically attracted to, but he could definitely get used to staring into those unguarded, oceanic eyes. “It was my pleasure,” he smiled, clutching at Jared’s preserver to cover his growing erection. Standing this close to the omega (my omega, his inner alpha corrected), it was a struggle to control himself. Reluctantly, he let Jared step back.

“Are you sure I can’t pay you back?” he asked earnestly. “Help cover the gas for the trip or something?”
And it was the polite thing to offer someone who owned a boat, but Jensen had a hunch that Jared’s finances couldn’t handle the strain. He understood the young mother better now and how he didn’t want to accept a handout. So, he suggested, “Maybe you could have me over for dinner one night?”

“You should come over tomorrow. Mommy always tries to make a nice dinner for Sunday supper,” Jamie offered helpfully, all but dancing around them both. She was an effervescent ball of energy and reminded Jensen of the way the harbor seals cavorted in the waves.

Jensen was about to politely refuse, not wanting to intrude on what Jared must have intended as family time when the omega smiled shyly. “I’m not as good a cook as you, but we’d love to have you over.”

Still clutching the jacket in front of his groin, Jensen shifted from one foot to the other, once again unbalanced by the man in front of him. “If you’re sure I wouldn’t be intruding,” he started, rubbing at the back of his neck nervously.

Jared’s smile broadened. “You would never be unwelcome.”

“In that case,” Jensen replied eagerly, “what time would you like me?”

Jared opened his mouth, but Jamie interrupted him. “We always have Sunday supper at six,” she singsonged, “because Mommy likes the literature. But if you come early, I can show you all my toys and we can play.”

“Alliteration,” Jared corrected her. He lowered his head and added, “You can come over earlier if you’d like. We’re casual about our Sunday supper.”

Jensen didn’t need to be asked twice. “I’d like that very much. Can I bring anything?”

“Nothing,” Jared said at the same time his daughter clapped, “Bacon fries.”

Trying very hard to keep from laughing, Jensen tried to salvage the situation. “Well, if I do that, I’ll probably have to bring extra milk, too.”

“Extra?” Jamie worried.

Nodding his head, Jensen told her, “It’s kind of a rule when you have fries.”

Jamie took a deep breath and let it go noisily. “That’s okay. We already have enough milk at home.”

Behind her, Jared mouthed, “Thank you,” to him. Jensen winked, jumping back onto the All In. He took Jamie’s vest from her and handed them both back their jackets.

“Need any help unloading?” Jared asked as Jensen grabbed for the larger cooler.

“Nah,” Jensen assured him. “I’ve got this. I can walk you two to your car,” he offered after setting the ice chest on the dock.

“That’s all right,” Jared said as he closed his hand around Jamie’s. “We walked this morning. It’s not far for us.”

And Jensen knew Callahan’s old place wasn’t more than two miles from the dock, but they had had to walk in the dark to get there. Granted, on a Saturday morning in Winnegance, there was no traffic to speak of other than fishermen. But it didn’t sit well with the alpha, knowing they had been vulnerable like that. After Jamie’s confession earlier, Jensen suspected their car must not have started.
Grabbing the smaller cooler with their dirty dishes, Jensen all but hopped onto the deck. “I can give you a ride home,” he offered. ‘You’re just up the road apiece. Bob Callahan’s old place, right?’

“You’ve already done too much, Jensen,” Jared began.

“I’ve got to swing by there anyway,” Jensen lied. “Briana lives near there and I need to drop off some paperwork for Kim to sign off on.”

Jared’s face scrunched up like his daughter’s would when she was trying to puzzle something out. “But you live above the bar. Why would you need to go to Deputy Briana?”

Jensen absolutely sucked at lying. “Well,” he huffed as he lifted both coolers up at once, arms straining with the effort, “I have to go and pick up some special parts I ordered for my bike down in Portland and it’s just easier for me to leave them then.”

“Your bicycle needs special parts?” Jamie asked. “Oh, did you get a basket for it? Mine has one with flowers on it. And it’s purple, because that’s my favorite color.”

Jensen had to bite his lip when he answered. “No, I don’t have a basket for my bike.”

“That’s too bad,” Jamie commiserated with him. “Maybe we can get him one,” she offered brightly as she turned towards her mother. “That would be a nice ‘Thank You’ gift.”

“Baby, his bike is a different kind than yours. Remember?”

“That’s right. You have a motorcycle,” she pronounced carefully. “I can’t have one of those until I’m real old like twenty or something.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Jensen finally said, when it seemed like she had been waiting for an answer from him. His mind was racing with the knowledge that Jared knew he rode a motorcycle. He must have recognized him from that pass he’d made by their house. “They’re kind of like a car more than they’re like a bicycle.”

“That’s what Mommy said after I said I would like to have one someday. Mommy has so many rules,” she mourned.

“Honey, the world has lots of rules we all have to follow,” Jensen told her sincerely. “Still sucks, though,” he whispered to her.

“Boy, does it,” she agreed with a sour face.

Setting the chests down, Jensen kneeled so that he was at her level. “There are definitely some dumb ones out there,” he confided, “but there is one thing I noticed.”

“What’s that?” Jamie asked eagerly, creeping closer to him.

“The rules that Mommies and Daddies come up with are always ones meant to keep you safe.”

“I guess,” she replied, not sounding entirely convinced.

“Now,” he said, hefting up the coolers, “how about that ride?”

Jared chewed at the corner of his mouth. “While I really appreciate the offer, I’m pretty sure you don’t have a car seat for you-know-who.”

Jensen tried not to groan out loud. He wondered if Jared would let him go to his house, get his and
come back for them, but he wrote that off as too pushy. He was about to argue that the town was casual enough that they could drive the two miles without getting stopped, when he told himself that that was definitely overstepping his bounds, potentially suggesting putting Jamie’s safety on the line.

“I know it doesn’t seem like a big deal,” Jared said quietly, “but the fines for omega children not,” and a muscle in his jaw ticked, “’strapped down’ is even higher than for other children not in their safety seats. I can’t risk it.”

Taking a step back, Jared forced a bright smile, “We appreciate the offer, don’t we, baby?”

Jamie’s head bounced vigorously. “Thank you, Captain Ackles.”

“But I think she and I are going to walk off our wobbles after sitting all morning,” he told her as he offered her his big hand. “Thank you for a very special day.” His face softened into a genuine smile then.

“Oh, yes,” Jamie agreed. “It was wicked awesome.”

Despite the bad taste in his mouth over the car seat issue, Jensen returned her affectionate declaration. “It was pretty awesome.”

“Wicked awesome,” she corrected him as Jared began to lead them away. “See you tomorrow!” she shouted over her shoulder.

Standing on the dock and holding up the ice chests, Jensen watched the two of them walk away. Jared’s free hand waved about, pointing things out to his daughter to keep her distracted on their walk home. Jensen understood that two miles on a summer day was not a hardship, but it was the principal of the matter that bugged him. Slowly trudging up to his truck, Jensen heaved the coolers onto the bed, securing them with bungee cords to keep them from sliding around. He honestly had no idea the fines were different for omega children, although it shouldn’t have been a surprise. Heading back to his boat to make sure he hadn’t forgotten anything, he decided to make his lie come true. A visit to Briana was in order, because he definitely had some questions.

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Sunday turned out to be as beautiful, weather-wise, as the day before – not a cloud in the sky. Hoping he wasn't pushing his luck, Jensen rolled to a stop in front of Jared’s house a full two hours early. He had formulated a plan and hoped that Jamie would help him out with it by playing along. He slammed the door to his ’57 Chevy truck shut as he finished slipping on a red, button-down shirt over his black wife-beater. Despite the heat, hardly cooled by the sea breeze, he wanted to look neat. He dragged his hands through his light brown locks nervously before he reached into the bed of his truck to lift out a bouquet of Black-eyed Susans and wild asters tied up with a big, purple ribbon.

Carefully closing the gate behind him (and noticing it didn’t latch properly, adding that to his mental list of things to fix), Jensen walked up to the front stairs, hiding the flowers behind him. Before he even had a chance to knock on the dilapidated, screen door, Jamie had swung it open. “You’re here,” she laughed, practically jumping up and down, pigtails bouncing. “Mommy, Captain Ackles is here.”

Jensen waited in the doorway for Jared to invite him in, one arm curled awkwardly behind his back. The younger man appeared from around the corner a moment later. He had on a baby blue t-shirt that brought out the aqua shades of his eyes. Long, bare toes peeped out from under the ragged hem of his jeans. Jensen was kind of entranced by their fragile vulnerability, so at odds with omega’s impressive height.
“Jensen,” he said warmly, bring him back to himself.

“Hope I’m not too early,” he replied sheepishly.

“This morning wouldn’t have been soon enough for this one,” he said, patting his daughter’s head. “I wouldn’t have minded, either,” he admitted shyly.

“For you,” he said, producing the yellow and purple flowers like a magician performing a trick to Jamie’s absolute delight.

“For me?” she breathed. “Really?”

“All for you,” he assured her.

She accepted the bundle with shaking hands. “No one ever gave me store-bought flowers before.” Practically hugging the bouquet to her little body, she said, “And purple is my most favoritest color,” she declared.

“Like your bike,” Jensen replied knowingly, sort of surprised that Jared hadn’t corrected her grammatical mistake.

“Just like my bike,” she agreed happily, staring raptly at her flowers.

“You should put those in water,” Jared croaked, not meeting Jensen’s gaze and he wondered if he had stepped over a line somehow. Maybe the omega was sad he had never gotten her flowers like that before.

“Yes!” she squealed, and dashed down the hallway and out of sight.

Left alone, Jensen wasn’t sure what to say. He shifted from one foot to another uncertainly. “I hope that was –” he started, but Jared cut him off.

“That was the nicest thing, Jensen,” he rasped, eyes blinking madly.

Stepping closer, Jensen saw tears in them. Embarrassed, Jared swiped harshly at his face, but Jensen caught his hand and tugged it down.

“I was happy to do it,” he said sincerely, rubbing his thumb against Jared’s knuckles.

“I know,” he choked up. “That’s why I’m…” he twisted his head away. Jensen didn’t try to tell him what to do or feel, but let him collect himself at his own pace.

Turning back to face Jensen, hair falling into his glassy eyes, Jared croaked, “Yesterday was a perfect day for us. For me,” he added. “And now you go and do this for her?” He wrapped his fingers around Jensen’s hand and squeezed. “No one has ever been this kind. I-I –”

“Mommy,” Jamie’s voice drifted down the hallway, “I’m going to stand on a chair to get the water-pitcher down, okay?”

Wiping nervously at his runny nose, Jared coughed to clear his throat. “Not without me, Jamie Lillian.” He dropped Jensen’s hand and jogged down the hallway, presumably toward the kitchen, to avert a pending disaster.

Jensen chuckled as he heard Jamie’s plaintive argument that she was a big girl as he was shucking off his boots by the doorway. Since neither Jamie nor Jared had been wearing shoes, he figured it was only good manners. Padding down the hallway, Jensen admired the various drawings that were
framed and hung on the freshly painted wall above the newly stained chair rail. Some were in crayon and others were finger-paint, but they were all Jamie’s work and hung with care. Following the sound of the family’s voices, he found the two of them standing in front of the sink. Jamie had a death grip on her bouquet while Jared was filling up a large water-pitcher from the tap.

The kitchen had also been recently repainted in a shade of lemony yellow, while the cabinets had been refinished a warm, honey oak. It made the room bright and homey. Jensen also didn’t miss the spread of ingredients scattered across the various counters. Jared was obviously planning something elaborate for dinner and Jensen was torn between feeling flattered at the effort and sorry to have caused it.

Setting the makeshift vase on the kitchen table and pulling out a chair, Jared told his daughter, “Why don’t you tie that pretty ribbon around the pitcher while I cut the ends of the flowers so they can get a fresh drink of water?”

“Oh,” Jared startled when he saw Jensen leaning against the doorway. “You didn’t need to take off your shoes,” he murmured, eyes down.

Pushing off of the door jamb, Jensen shook his head dismissively. “Not a problem. I didn’t want to scuff up your nice floors.” And they were nice, he noted, polished to a high gleam.

“Well,” he waved his handed around nervously, “I’m not too good with some of the outside stuff, but keeping the interior clean is like second-nature. Back in Dallas, our housing kind of depended on it.” He shut himself up then, looking uncomfortably at his oblivious daughter, who was carefully placing each flower in the vase. Jensen had an inkling what kind of language must have been written into rental contracts for omegas back in Texas. The Fair Housing Act should have made that kind of shit illegal, but picturing Jared living with a bunch of struggling omegas, he didn’t think they would have had the means to hire a lawyer and rock that boat even with the Omega Network’s assistance.

“The place looks great. A heck of a lot better than the way Callahan left it,” he told him.

“You think?” Jared rolled his lower lip into his mouth, biting down hard. “We’re doing that ‘rent-to-own’ thing and I wouldn't want him to think we weren’t taking good care of the place.”

“It’s awesome,” he assured Jared. “You’re making your home beautiful.” That did the trick and those delectable dimples made an appearance, leaving Jensen weak in the knees.

“All done,” Jamie announced.

“That’s lovely, baby,” Jared praised her arrangement. “In fact, that should be the centerpiece at the table for dinner tonight.” Jamie beamed up at her mother. “Speaking of, I should get started. Why don’t you show Captain Ackles your room? I bet he’d like that.”

“I would love to see your room, Jamie,” Jensen told her.

“C’mon,” she said as she clasped his hand without hesitation. Jensen was shocked by how good it felt to be the recipient of that trust as the little girl tugged him out of the kitchen and up the nearby stairs.

“My room’s down here,” she told him breathlessly as they came to a stop in front of a door with a glittery sign that had “Jamie” written in neat cursive. Pushing open the door (well-oiled, since it
swung open without a sound), Jensen was greeted with a symphony of lavender and white with grace notes of amethyst. The furniture was probably secondhand, but it had been lovingly refinished and repainted a pristine white scattered with violet nosegays. The walls were a pastel purple with white curtains blowing in the breeze of the open dormer window.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” Jamie proclaimed proudly.

“It’s perfect,” Jensen replied.

“My mommy did all of this for me,” she said with her arms stretched wide. “There are even fairy lights,” she exclaimed, pointing to the webbing of tiny wires strung above her canopy bed. “But they look better in the dark when he sings ‘Twinkle Twinkle’ to me. Do you know that song?”

“I do. My mommy used to sing it to me, too.” He hadn’t thought of that in more years than he cared to admit.

“Really? Well, my mommy can sing it for you sometime if you’re lonesome for your mommy.”

“Thanks, honey,” he smiled, stroking her downy cheek. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Would you like to see my toys?” she asked earnestly. “They’re in my hope chest.”

Jensen grinned at the old-fashioned term, wondering what Jamie hoped for and, more importantly, what Jared hoped for her to have in her life.

“I would love to, but I wanted to ask you a big favor,” he answered in a grave tone.

“A big favor? Oooh, then I can do something really nice back for you. I want to do that,” she said, pigtails swinging eagerly.

Jensen squatted down in front of her, rubbing his hands against his thighs. “I brought some of my tools today and if you told your Mommy that you wanted to take a look at my truck’s engine, maybe we –”

“You could show me how to fix our car,” she finished for him, barely able to hide her excitement. “That’s way better than my toys. I’d do anything so Mommy wouldn’t worry. Thank you so much. C’mon!”

She pulled on his hands and practically dragged him out into the hallway. He got a rushed glimpse of what must have been Jared’s bedroom. It was done up in shades of white and beige and he thought he caught a glimpse of a pink throw pillow or two before Jamie’s insistent pulling had him scrambling to keep up with her as she all but flew down the stairs. He tried, with little success, not to picture what Jared must look like, spread out on those sheets.

“Captain Ackles is going to show me his truck,” she called out as she raced down the hallway.

“What?” came Jared’s muffled response.

“Going to go look at Captain Ackles’ truck, Mommy!”

As Jensen was tying up his boots, Jared came out of the kitchen with a mixing bowl in his hands. There was a smudge of flour across his nose and Jensen was dying to brush it off. “What are you up to?” he asked his whirlwind daughter.

Jamie rolled her eyes and exhaled loudly. “Captain Ackles is going to show me his truck. I want to
see the engine, Mommy.”

“Oh, well,” Jared paused, gaze flicking between Jamie and him, “make sure you put on your shoes and don’t touch anything Captain Ackles says you can’t.”

“Yup,” she promised, slipping on flip flops a shade of purple that matched her t-shirt perfectly.

“And no crossing the street,” he warned her with a worried expression.

“No crossing the street,” Jamie repeated, flinging open the screen door with a slap of wood against wood.

“Wait for me by the gate,” Jensen called out after her.

“Yup, yup, yup,” she skipped away.

“I’ll keep a close eye on her,” Jensen reassured him, keeping Jamie in his sight.

Taking a calming breath, Jared nodded, absently stirring the bowl. Jensen understood how much trust Jared was placing in him. “I do have a favor to ask,” Jensen added.

“What’s that?”

“Do you mind if I showed her your engine instead?” When Jared looked like he might come up with a reason to decline, Jensen pushed on. “My truck is fairly big and it would be hard to hold her safely and show her stuff at the same time.” Jensen kind of hated himself for the lie, but he was sure Jared was too proud to ask for help. “She’s pretty eager to learn.”

Sighing, Jared jerked his chin toward the woven basket on the small table by the door. “The keys are in there. It—it’s probably messy under the hood,” he added shamefaced. “Might not be so easy to figure out what’s what. I’m pretty good with this stuff,” he flipped his head toward the kitchen, “but cars aren’t my forte.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Jensen assured him, hating that Jared felt guilty about the state of his car. Jared nodded and started to walk away when Jensen called out, “Hold on.” He walked up to the omega and lightly brushed across his nose, letting his fingers linger against his cheek. “You had a little something there,” he explained when Jared’s eyes had widened.

“Oh, God,” he huffed, face flushing a lovely pink. Jensen wondered if that color would seep down his neck and chest under the right circumstances.

“Hold it a sec,” he said lowly, catching Jared around the waist. With a featherlight touch, he dragged his lips across the omega’s, teasing the plump flesh more than anything else.

Jared clutched the bowl to his chest in much the same way that his daughter had clung to her flowers. “Was there something there, too?” he asked softly.

Stepping back, Jensen smirked. “Me. I was there.”

“Captain Ackles!” Jamie bellowed from outside.

“Y—you better go,” Jared stuttered, clearly flustered. “That one is like a dog with a bone when she wants something.”

Leaning forward, Jensen pressed his mouth up against Jared’s ear. “So am I.” He couldn’t resist and placed a gentle kiss against the shell of Jared’s ear before exiting the front door. “Coming, honey,”
he called out to the eager girl, winking at Jared as he left.

Like she had promised, Jamie waited patiently by the closed gate. As Jensen fiddled with the latch, she looked past him, trying to see his truck. “Is that the lobster boat of the Maine roads?” she asked with an impish grin.

Jensen closed his eyes and threw back his head, laughter rumbling out from deep in his chest. “Yes, it is,” he finally managed to get out, wiping at his eyes. “You’re something else,” he proclaimed, giving her head a messy pat.

“Yes, I am,” she agreed proudly as he swung the gate open.

“You stay close, okay, honey?” he reminded her, taking Jared’s concerns to heart even though there was absolutely no kind of traffic on their quiet street.

“Of course,” she pronounced with a serious bounce of her head.

“Good girl. Why don’t you go over to your Mommy’s car while I bring some of my stuff over? Have you ever unlocked the car door before?”

“Uh huh. A couple of times,” she admitted.

“Then you go ahead and unlock the door, but that’s it,” he warned her seriously. “No driving off anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes as she accepted the keys. “Ruiner,” she moaned and trudged over to the dark green Ford, her flip flops slapping against the sidewalk despondently.

“I don’t think that’s a real word,” he called after her.

She spun around and gave him her patented stink eye. “Double ruiner.”

Jensen’s shoulders shook with mirth while he pulled out his creeper, toolbox and oil catch pan. He deposited those things by the car, making sure that Jamie was staying where she was supposed to, before he returned to his truck bed to grab several quarts of oil and a couple of milk crates. Stacking the crates to one side of the hood, he put everything else on the other.

“Let me show you how to pop the hood,” he told Jamie as he slid into the driver’s side, accepting the keys back. He hissed as his ass touched the very hot seat, leaning forward to avoid parboiling his back, too. She tracked his every move with wide, inquisitive eyes. He made sure that she saw where the release was and how to engage it, before escaping the tiny, sweat box.

Once he had done that, he rummaged around in his tool box, grabbing some rags and safety glasses. “Now, I want you to stand over here,” he told Jamie as he helped her up onto the stacked crates, which gave her a good view of the engine from the passenger side of the car, “and it is really, really important that you don’t touch anything especially if the engine is running.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” she told him.

He pushed a clear set of safety glasses on her face and tucked a clean rag into the back pocket of her denim shorts. Shifting from one side to the other, he gave her a nod of approval. “Now you’re set.” She grinned up at him.

Jensen pulled off his long-sleeved shirt and tossed it across his toolbox. He leaned over the engine and gave it a critical once-over. Without trying to start it, he saw that it definitely needed some basic
TLC. He figured he could change the oil, the filters and clean out the carburetor before dinner. That might be enough of a quick fix to buy him time for anything else it might need.

He started with changing the oil, since that was the easiest. Jamie was fascinated with the creeper, saying it looked like the most comfortable skateboard in the whole world as he rolled under the car. Wincing a little at the condition of the undercarriage, he had Jamie collect his empty jugs from where he’d left them lined up on the tailgate, knowing she could reach them there. While she had hunkered down to avidly watch him pour the used oil from the pan into them, she had no desire to touch the gunk.

“Icky,” she pronounced with a scrunched-up face.

“Definitely,” Jensen agreed.

He was in the process of unscrewing the air filter housing when Jamie let out a small gasp. “Don’t let Mommy see that or you’re gonna be in trouble,” she warned him from her milk crate perch.

“See what?” he asked her.

“You wrote on your arm,” she pointed carefully to his left bicep. “Mommy gets really mad if I write on myself even if it’s with a crayon,” she explained knowingly. “I colored my nails with a marker one time and I had to do all the dishes for a whole week. It was the worst thing ever.” She let out a loud breath like the memory still weighed on her.

“That’s a tattoo,” he explained, scrubbing at his bicep with a rag. “See? It doesn’t come off.”

“Oh,” she gasped. “Never ever?”

“Well, there are ways to get rid of them, but they kind of hurt. Then again, getting a tattoo hurts, too. It’s why they only put them on adults,” he added quickly, hoping to nip any tattoo request in the bud. He didn’t think Jared would appreciate having to deal with that because of him.

He moved over so she could get a better look. “Those are Naval aviator wings,” he pointed to the design.

She peered closely and then shook her head. “I can see the words around them, but I don’t understand ’em.”

“They’re written in Latin.”

“Another language? Mommy can speak in French and you know Latin? I only know English,” she sighed dramatically.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” he said and her face lit up.

“I love secrets,” she breathed.

“I don’t know Latin except for this phrase,” he said as he flexed his bicep. “Can you sound it out for me?”

“Okay,” Jamie agreed and dragged her little fingers across the gothic lettering. “Non sibi sed patr… party?”

“What’s it mean?” she asked, blowing one of her curls out of her eyes.

Wiping his hands with the rag, Jensen replied, “‘Not for self, but country’. When he saw her frown, he explained, “It means that you’re not doing the job for yourself but for the whole country. It’s the unofficial saying for the Navy.”

She looked at him seriously with her cerulean eyes, tapping her finger against her chin. “You must have loved your job a whole lot to write that on your arm forever, huh?”

“Very much, munchkin,” he agreed. ’But, in the end, it wasn’t enough for me.”

Jamie tilted her head, hair drifting across her eyes like her mother’s did. “Why not?”

Taking a deep breath and letting it go, Jensen said, “You know when you get hungry and your tummy grumbles?”

Nodding along, Jamie explained, “Sometimes mine is even louder than Mommy’s. Like there’s a big hole there.” She jabbed at her stomach with her thumb like she was trying to ferret out the chasm.

“That’s how I started to feel at work. Like there was a big hole and the job didn’t fill it up like it used to.”

“So, you had to find something else,” she nodded knowingly. “I’ll bet dinner tonight will do it. Mommy is making a really special dinner for us today.”

“You two definitely fill me up,” he confessed to the little girl and she practically glowed at the words.

“You fill Mommy up,” she told him ingenuously.

“Well, er…” Jensen coughed, blushing at her turn of phrase, because “filling” Jared up was something he definitely had fantasized about.

Unbeknownst to the way her words had affected Jensen, Jamie went on, “Yesterday, he was singing and dancing around the house. He doesn’t do that much. I’m so glad we found you.” She jumped off the crates and hugged Jensen tight about his waist, her hot face pressed against his stomach.

Startled, it took Jensen a second to get with the program before he wrapped his arms around her slight shoulders. “Me, too, munchkin. Me, too,” he whispered. Swallowing around the lump that had taken up residence in his throat, he said, “How about we tackle the carburetor? Can you get me four rags just like the one in your pocket? They’re over in my toolbox.”

Jamie hopped away and Jensen dragged his hand down his mouth, trying to collect himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t like children, Jensen was simply struggling to come to grips with how much he cared about Jamie. It was too soon, he reminded himself, to fall in love with anyone. And yet, he was. He was falling in love with both of them.

“Are these good?” Jamie asked, holding up a wad of rags.

“Those are perfect.” He bent down and slung an arm around her waist, hoisting her up against his hip with the other hand shielding her head so she didn’t bang it accidentally on the open hood. “Can you put one on each side of the carburetor down there?” He pointed to the device once he was certain her head was safe.

“Like this?” she squirmed around in his grip to look at him.
“Just like that,” he congratulated her as he let her slide down to the ground. “But now I need you to step back, because I have to spray some carb cleaner into it and I don’t want you to breathe any of it in, okay? Can you sit on the grass over there while I do it?”

“Okie dokie,” she agreed and got out of the way as he sprayed the carb and the throttle area linkage.

“How come you have a shiny thing on one boot?” Jamie asked from where she was sitting, head tilted to the side, studying his feet.

Slipping a finger down, Jensen brushed against the dog tag he had laced into his left boot – an old, Navy habit he never stopped doing.

“That’s one of my ID tags from the Navy. I have the other one at home on a chain, but no one wears them that way because they can get caught in machinery and cause a lot of damage. Pilots usually wear one like this,” he explained, rotating his ankle. “I’ve been doing it for so many years, I don’t even think about it anymore. When something is important to me, I don’t let go of it.”

Wiping everything down after the cleaner had a chance to do its job, Jensen was pleased that there wasn’t a ton of sludge buildup. Maybe it wouldn’t need a rebuild after all. “I’m going to start the car. Keep your fingers crossed.” He couldn’t help but chuckle at the solemn way Jamie did just that. He was pretty sure she’d even crossed her toes, too.

Dropping into the driver seat, Jensen held his breath as he turned the ignition. With only a little cough, the car started up. Jamie jumped up with her hands in the air, cheering. Jensen got back out and offered her a fist bump. He reached across the engine and worked the throttle control, revving the engine from there to force the cleaner through it. He was wiping his hands again when he heard Jared behind them.

“You got it running,” he said with a tremulous smile.

“Mommy, I helped Captain Ackles fix the carburrito,” Jamie announced proudly.

Jensen chuckled, dragging a forearm across his sweaty face. “That she did,” he confirmed, letting the slip pass. He kind of liked that name. “She’s a great assistant.”

“Well, if it’s okay with you, Captain, I’d like to steal Jamie away. I could use her help setting the table since dinner is about ready.”

“Okay, Mommy.” She carefully took off her safety glasses and handed them and her rag back to Jensen. “Thanks. I learned a lot today. Maybe next time you come, you can show me more please?”

“I think that can be arranged, honey.” She skipped away, humming under her breath.

“Jensen, I can’t thank you enough,” Jared began, shoving his hands in his back pockets. He seemed at a loss for what to do.

“You already have,” Jensen replied smoothly, stepping into his space. “Dinner smells delicious.”

“That’s not enough,” Jared scoffed. “All this…” he waved one hand toward his car.

“Told you I needed to get some parts in Portland yesterday. I just stocked up on a few, extra items,” he assured Jared. “It’s no big deal.”

“Jensen,” the omega wheedled.
“Jared,” he countered playfully, snagging one of Jared’s belt loops and pulling him close enough that their groins bumped together.

The younger man placed his hands against Jensen’s chest like he meant to push him away, only he let them linger too long. Hesitantly, he pressed his fingertips against the firm muscles, breath hitching. “Jensen,” he exhaled, inching closer.

“Mommy,” Jamie called from inside, “the oven’s buzz, buzz buzzing.”

Jared laughed nervously and stepped back, but not before Jensen surged up and stole a quick kiss. “I need to put this stuff away and drop in a new filter before I replace the housing. Shouldn’t take more than a few minutes. Better get going before she tries to help,” Jensen urged him.

“Yeah,” Jared said slowly, “I better.”

Jensen grabbed his toolbox in one hand and the jug of used oil in the other. Putting them in the back of his truck, he took a moment to stretch out his shoulders and arms, rolling his neck one way and then the other. Turning around, he noticed Jared lingering by the front door, kind of staring at him. As soon as he realized he was caught, he ducked back inside quickly. Shaking out his long-sleeved shirt, Jensen didn’t even try to stop the shit-eating grin that graced his face. He knew when he was being checked out and Jared had definitely been checking him out. He slammed the tailgate shut and went back to the little Ford. And if there was a spring in his step, there was no one around to tease him over it.

“Wow,” Jensen exclaimed as he entered the kitchen. Jamie’s flowers, like Jared had promised, held a place of honor at the center of the table. The plates were mismatched and the glasses had a dated, floral pattern that reminded Jensen of a set his grandmother had collected from a gas station when he was little. One of them (Jared’s, he guessed) was chipped, but Jensen had never seen a prettier table setting. Jamie was already seated, legs swinging restlessly.

“You sit next to me,” she said, patting the spot to her right.

“Let me just wash my hands, little lady,” he winked at her. “Engine work is messy work.” He sidled up to the sink, while Jared was tossing something in a pan that smelled suspiciously like clams in garlic and wine. Wiping his damp hands on a small dish towel, Jensen startled when the oven timer went off a second time. “Let me help,” Jensen offered as he watched Jared try to transfer the clams and pasta into a serving dish. Water hissed on the stovetop where a little spilled in the process.

“Could you grab the potholders,” he gestured to the counter by the stove with his chin, “and check the pie?”

Opening up the antiquated oven, Jensen pulled out a heavenly smelling pie with golden crust. He spotted a cooling rack already set out in the garden window over the sink and put it there. “This all looks amazing,” Jensen complimented him as he sat beside Jamie.

In a large dish, two dozen little neck clams were nestled on a bed of linguine and fiddleheads dotted with red pepper flakes. Jared scratched at his cheek and smiled bashfully. “Jamie and I picked the wild blueberries for the pie last week up on Blueberry Mountain.”

He spooned out a small portion for his daughter. “And we got the fiddlers there, too,” Jamie added helpfully.

“The fiddleheads,” Jared corrected her gently. “Everything’s local except for the pasta, which I made from scratch. So, if it’s no good, I’m the one to blame for that,” he said as he passed the bowl over to
Jensen. “Can I get you something to drink? I’ve got some white wine leftover from the sauce, juice or water?”

Jensen had wanted to say something about the reflexive way Jared denigrated himself, but let it pass for the time being. “I think I’ll have milk, if you’ve got some.”

Jamie’s eyes widened in shock. “It’s what most professional mechanics drink after working hard on cars,” he announced to no one in particular.

“Milk for me, too, Mommy. Please.” Jamie held her glass out with both hands expectantly.

“Can’t argue with that,” Jared laughed, getting the milk out of the fridge.

Over the course of the dinner, Jared visibly relaxed as he saw how much Jensen genuinely enjoyed the meal. His smiles came quicker and Jensen was delighted by the way he threw his head back and clapped his hands when he laughed. It was an infectious sound and loosened something inside of Jensen. Sitting between the two of them, Jensen had a loopy grin on his face, soaking up the family banter, adding details to the “carburitto” story when Jamie prodded him to elaborate. By the time he was scraping up the last of the blueberry filling that had oozed onto his plate, Jensen was full in more ways than one, with Jamie’s prophetic words still ringing in his ears.

Jared turned to Jamie and said, “Since you helped set the table and did so much work on the car, you don’t need to help with the dishes, baby.”

“Yay,” Jamie cheered.

“But it is time to get ready for bed,” Jared continued, glancing at the fading daylight spilling in from the kitchen window.

“Boo,” she groaned.

“If you’re super careful and think you can do it without spilling, you can take your special flowers and put them on your night table,” he offered her as a consolation prize.

“I can be super duper careful,” she promised. Before Jared could prompt her, she said, “They’re the most beautiful flowers in the world. Thank you so much, Captain Ackles.”

Cutting his eyes to Jared for a second, he said, “If it’s okay with your mommy, you can call me Jensen.”

She lifted expectant eyes to Jared, who nodded back. “Thank you, Jensen.” She slid off the chair and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek. “They’re so pretty,” she sighed, admiring her bouquet while Jared discreetly poured off some of the water into the sink before handing the pitcher over to his daughter.

“Almost as pretty as you are,” Jensen pointed out. Jamie kind of buried her face in blossoms and giggled at his compliment. She took careful, measured steps as she left the kitchen.

“Don’t forget to tell me goodnight, Jensen,” she hollered down from the stairs.

Leaning back against the rickety chair, Jensen moaned in satisfaction. “That was really good, Jared,” he offered. “I am stuffed.”

Jared reached over to collect his empty plate, bangs falling into his face and hiding his eyes. His hair couldn’t cover the pleased smile that pulled at his lips, however. “Only good?” he inquired seriously,
but he tilted his head enough for Jensen to catch the mischievous glint in his ever-changing eyes.

“Awesome,” Jensen corrected. “Wicked awesome.” He got up as well and helped Jared gather up the dishes.

“You don’t have to –” Jared started, but Jensen cut him off.

“I know,” he said, setting some plates on the counter, “but I want to. I wash, you rinse?”

Jared ducked his head down. “Okay,” he exhaled quietly.

They stood shoulder to shoulder by the sink, not saying a word. The sky grew soft and purple, the heat of the day finally becoming comfortably mellow. Jensen had peeled his socks off when he came in the second time and he occasionally brushed his bare toes against Jared’s while he scrubbed the pans. And if his soapy fingers lingered on the omega’s a beat too long when he passed him a dish or glass, neither one complained.

When Jared set the last pot in the drying rack, Jensen was toweling off his hands. “I had a really nice time today.”

“Me, too,” Jared answered.

Jensen handed him the dishrag, but surprised Jared by yanking it back so that he stumbled into Jensen. Letting the towel drop, forgotten and unneeded, onto the floor, Jensen reached up and cupped Jared’s face in his hands. Gently, he guided the taller man closer, giving him a chance to get away if it was too much. Scattering kisses along Jared’s lips and jaw, Jensen maneuvered them so that the omega was pressed up against the counter, caught between his outstretched arms. Jared unconsciously widened his stance and Jensen pressed boldly between his long legs. As he nosed around the tender skin behind Jared’s ear, taking a moment to breathe in the omega’s heady scent and appreciate the heat radiating off his lean body, Jared moaned and let his head drop back at the intimate touch. Jensen sucked in the plump lobe of his ear and Jared’s hands flailed backward against the cracked and faded Formica, knees no longer able to support himself. Jensen grinned as he slung an arm around Jared’s waist to hold him up and made a mental note of the erogenous zone before dragging his full lips down the elegant arch of Jared’s throat, dying to find other hot spots, wanting to wind Jared up in the best possible way.

“Jensen,” Jared gasped, grabbing at his belt to yank him closer.

“Jensen,” Jamie called from upstairs. “I’m ready.”

The alpha let his head fall against Jared’s collarbone, rolling it back and forth there. He huffed out a laugh and tried to control his breathing, heart pounding against his rib cage. When he raised up his eyes, he saw that Jared, beautifully flushed a rosy hue, had started to chew on his lower lip nervously.

“That’s mine,” he surprised himself by growling softly and caught the worried flesh between his lips, soothing it with tiny licks and nips. When he pulled away, he graced Jared with a soft smile. “Timing’s everything, huh?” And he tucked several strands of Jared’s silky hair behind his ear, brushing his thumb against the beauty mark beside the omega’s pointy nose. “We better head up before she comes down looking for us, right?” He couldn’t resist kissing Jared again. “Your daughter is something else.” He stepped back, willing his growing erection to go away.

“Yeah,” Jared whispered. “We’re kind of a package deal, you know? J2 to the end.” He plucked at the hem of his t-shirt distractedly.
Jensen caught his fidgeting hands and squeezed them reassuringly. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Keeping ahold of one, he led Jared over to the stairs, before waving him forward. He’d meant the gesture as a gentlemanly one, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off the way the worn denim of Jared’s jeans hugged the perfect, round globes of the omega’s irresistible ass or the way his firm backside bunched and flexed with each step. Jensen had to let out a shaky breath and continue to convince his erection that now was not the time.

Jared pushed open the door to Jamie’s room and Jensen had to admit the scattering of white, Christmas lights that Jared had woven through the canopy of her bed was a magical touch. In the gathering gloom of night, the white pinpoints protectively cocooned the little girl better than any nightlight could hope to.

Jared pulled up her covers and kissed her freshly-scrubbed face. “Have the sweetest dreams, angel.”

“You, too, Mommy.”

Unsure what he should do, Jensen pat the foot of her bed. “Pleasant dreams, kiddo,” he said softly. Jamie frowned and held out her arms. Jared stepped back obligingly and Jensen leaned over to accept her hug and kiss, placing one on her cheek in return. He went to pull away, but she held onto one of his hands.

“Mommy, instead of singing to me tonight, would you sing to Jensen? His mommy sang the Twinkle song for him and I think he misses that,” she instructed her mother.

“All right, baby. I can do that,” he assured her, combing his fingers through the dark curls resting against her forehead. He got up and adjusted the open window while Jensen waved to the little omega where she was curled up on her pillows.

“Oh,” she called out sleepily, “how do you spell your name?” She struggled to keep her eyes open as she looked at Jensen.

As soon as he said the first letter, she momentarily rallied against sleep. “Oh, my. You’re a J, too? Mommy, that makes us J3. That’s perfect,” she squeaked excitedly.

Both men were already standing in the doorway. “It is, baby,” Jared agreed. “Now close your eyes so morning can come.” He ushered Jensen out and softly pulled the door mostly shut behind him.

They stood awkwardly in the hallway. The only light was the rising moon, filtered through the curtains of the window at the far end. Jared rubbed his fingers together and glanced from Jamie’s bedroom to his own before Jensen tugged him toward the stairs. He wasn’t sure if it was relief or disappointment that played across Jared’s features at that decision. Jensen went first, mostly to be polite, but there was a part of him that wouldn’t be able to watch Jared’s fine ass again and walk away.

When they reached the first floor, Jensen headed to the front door without saying a word. Slipping into his socks and shoes, he said, “I had a lovely time today, Jared.”

The omega nodded, watching as he laced up his boots. He didn’t seem to be convinced of Jensen’s sincerity. Standing up, Jensen pulled Jared into his arms. “I kinda have to leave, Jared, because if I don’t,” and he shifted so that his unflagging erection brushed against Jared’s groin, “I’m going to want to do all kinds of things to you that I don’t think we’re ready for yet.” With his boots on, he only had to roll up a little onto the balls of his feet to reach the omega’s ear. “I wanna court you, sweetheart,” he exhaled hotly before pressing a kiss along the curve of his delicate shell.
He came back down and stared intently at Jared, who seemed all twisted up by the endearment. “I wanna do it right. I wanna learn everything there is about you and Jamie. I want us to have family dinners after days spent together. I want you to know everything about me before we go any further like this,” and he rubbed his achingly hard cock against Jared’s, which had plumped up in the meantime. They both groaned softly, mindful of the little girl upstairs.

He freed one hand to trail his rough thumb against Jared’s cheekbone. “I want so many things, Jared, but only,” and he paused to shake the omega a little, “only if you want it, too.” His green eyes flicked back and forth, trying to read Jared’s enigmatic ones.


“J3,” Jensen agreed. “Jamie was right. It is perfect.”

And with that, Jensen pressed a final, lingering kiss to Jared’s flushed lips and reluctantly slipped into the cooling night.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Uh...the chapter count went up again.

Sorry?

And thanks to Heartblowswild for the read-through!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

August was too soon a memory, with its halcyon days of endless heat fading into something mellow. The September sun was a little brighter and a little colder, losing the orange blaze of summer and taking on the brittle glow that heralded the coming cooler weather. And the quality of light wasn’t the only change.

Winnegance had the brief respite that came when the last trickle of the summer people’s exodus dried up and the leaf peepers wouldn’t descend en force until the following month. It should have meant business slowing down at The Pitch & Roll, a time Jensen and Kim appreciated and dreaded as they caught their breath from a successful summer. However, Jensen’s loyalty program had actually kind of taken off and while the “outta statahs” might have fled, the regulars returned during the week and weekends, bumping up their lunch traffic noticeably. Weekdays especially saw primary caregivers coming in to treat themselves and catch up with friends now that school had started up again.

School.

That had been a big change in Jensen’s life this year, since he had the chance to see both of the people in his life embark on new and slightly nerve-racking adventures without him. Jared had been the first to go.

The week before his first class, the omega had been kind of frantic about finding temporary daycare for the five days he’d be teaching and Jamie would be waiting for kindergarten to start. The Omega Network, while maintaining valuable connections in the state of Maine, wasn’t able to help Jared much in the sparsely populated Winnegance. Jensen knew secondhand of a few betas who ran informal daycare centers, but he couldn’t personally vouch for them. And he didn’t know of any omegas who did. When he thought about it, Jensen didn’t think he knew of any omegas living in Winnegance at all. Granted, with a population of less than two thousand, he supposed it wasn’t all that odd. He just noticed that he hadn’t noticed it before.

“What am I going to do?” Jared had worried quietly. Jamie was in the backyard, sorting nails and screws by size and type for the fencing project she and Jensen were going to tackle. He glanced out the window, reassuring himself she was staying out of trouble, fingers drumming against the countertop in a discordant beat. Jensen put down his glass of fresh lemonade (“I squished ‘em all by myself,” Jamie had proudly declared that afternoon) and stepped up behind Jared. He placed his left hand over Jared’s twitching one and he held onto the omega’s bicep with the other. Pressing flush up against his back, Jensen simply held on, offering a wall of strength for Jared to lean against. Eventually, he calmed under Jensen’s touch.

Wiggling around (and doing wonderfully terrible things to Jensen’s needy groin in the process),
Jared exhaled, “Thank you,” before giving him a kiss. It was quick, almost like the comfortable familiarity between lovers, but it was the first one the omega had instigated. Jensen was thrilled and, unfortunately for him, impossibly aroused by that demure press of flesh against his. “Still don’t know what I’m going to do, though,” he said with a shrug.

Taking a deep breath and trying hard not to crowd into everything that was in front of him, Jensen shook his head in an attempt to clear senses that were all full of Jared. After a second, he asked, “I know this is probably a stupid question, but why can’t she come with you? Don’t some of the teachers that live on campus have kids? Aren’t there accommodations for them there during classes?”

Even if he hadn’t been holding Jared in his arms, he wouldn’t have missed the discomfort he was in. “They won’t allow it.” He dropped his eyes, unwilling to meet Jensen’s stare. “Something about how she wouldn’t be covered under their insurance since she’s not in residence like the other kids are.”

“Buncha bullshit,” Jensen muttered under his breath.

“I’ve got them sorted, Jensen,” Jamie announced as she ran into the kitchen. “What are you two doing?”

Jensen started to pull away, uncertain if Jared wanted his daughter to see them like this, but Jared placed his hands around Jensen’s hips and kept him close. Between the kiss, freely given, and now Jared wanting Jamie to start to get used to the idea of them together, Jensen was riding high. It’s what gave him the courage to make his offer.

“We were talking about you, honey,” he explained, moving to stand beside Jared and sling an arm around Jared’s waist.

“I didn’t do it,” she shook her head vehemently.

Jensen quirked his right eyebrow, wondering what in the world she was talking about.

“Really?” Jared asked her in a knowing tone, losing Jensen completely in the process.

“Really,” she agreed too quickly.

“Mm hmm,” the young mother hummed.

And then Jensen realized that Jamie had inadvertently ratted herself out. Bouncing from one foot to the other like she needed to use the potty (and when had that word snuck into Jensen’s vocabulary?), she cracked under her mother’s knowing look.

“I only peeked in Jensen’s toolbox. I didn’t touch anything. I promise,” she confessed reluctantly.

“Honey, I don’t mind you looking or even touching some of the things in there as long as I’m around when you do,” Jensen began, taking the lead. “But there are sharp tools in there. Do you know how badly I would feel if you hurt yourself?”

“Pretty bad?” she offered timidly, tugging the fingers of one hand with the other. She and her mother had the same habits when scared or uncertain.

Jensen stepped away from the counter and kneeled in front of her. “I would feel it like I was the one who got hurt. That’s how bad.”

“I won’t do it again. I really promise this time,” she said.
“A promise should always be a promise,” Jared reminded her, “not just when you feel like it. You expect me to keep all of mine, right?” She bobbed her head frantically. “I need to trust you the same way.”

“I won’t do it again,” she mumbled, but at least was brave enough to meet their combined stares.

“Oh okay,” Jared relented after a very long pause.

“And that brings us to the other thing we were talking about,” Jensen continued. “Why don’t we all sit down and talk about it?”

Jared was curious, but he didn’t say anything. When they were in their usual seats for dinner, Jensen scratched at the back of his neck before continuing. “You know what next week is, right?”

“Mommy starts school,” Jamie stated proudly.

“Right and you don’t until the week after, so I thought if it was okay with both of you,” and he glanced back and forth between the two of them, “I would come and stay with you here while your mother’s at school.”

Jared started to object at the same time that Jamie began cheering. Jensen winced internally, afraid he might have overstepped again, but forced himself to push on. If he was going to be a part of the family, he needed to be able to be a part of them. “I can get here before you head off to class,” he told Jared, before addressing Jamie, “and then we can work on our fencing project and other stuff until your mother gets back.”

“And we can have bacon fries for lunch every day!” Jamie grinned.

“And milk,” Jensen reminded her. He smirked at the grumbles from her side of the table. Almost sheepishly, he glanced at Jared, trying to get a read on him.

“Jensen, that’s a really generous offer,” he sighed.

“I know. I’m pretty wonderful,” he waggled his eyebrows at him. The omega tried hard not to smirk and almost succeeded.

“You are!” Jamie agreed. “We’re going to have so much fun.”

Apparently still trying to find fault with the plan, Jared said, “But you’re going to be so tired. The bar closes at 2 a.m. and you don’t get to bed before 3 or 4. That’s only three hours of sleep.”

“I slept less while flying jets, Jared, and it’s only for five days. I can handle it and keep her safe,” he promised softly. Perhaps sensing it was an important moment, Jamie stayed quiet, watching them with her serious, blue eyes.

Jared sucked his upper lip in and bit down hard. And Jensen got it. It was a huge leap of faith for Jared to leave the person he loved most in someone else’s care. Finally nodding to himself, Jared shifted in his chair to face Jamie.

“Do you understand how important it is to listen to Jensen and me?” he questioned her. “Why if you make me or him a promise, you absolutely have to keep it? If you hadn’t gone poking around in his toolbox without permission, I would have already said ‘yes’.”

Jensen inhaled sharply and was about to argue that Jared would have still hemmed and hawed, but he recognized this as a teaching moment and kept silent.
Jamie’s eyes got big and watery. “I won’t ever do it again, Mommy. I promise to keep my word.” Fidgeting in her seat, she cast her mournful, puppy eyes toward Jensen. “I’m sorry I didn’t listen, Jensen. I really am.”

Those eyes would be the death of him. Jensen was crumbling inside and hoped Jared wouldn’t drag it out much longer, because he honestly didn't know if he could take it. “I accept your apology, honey.”

That was apparently it, because Jared said, “All right. Jensen can come over,” and he hurried to finish speaking because Jamie was already grinning and probably daydreaming about fries, “and you will listen to him like it was me talking and do everything he says.”

“I promise,” she squealed, slithering out of her seat and rushing over to hug Jensen. “We’re going to have so much fun,” she declared a second time.

Jensen squeezed back. “And lots of work, too. We’ve got an important project to finish up.”

“Right,” she saluted. “Oh, I need to figure out what I’m gonna wear.” And with that, she was out of the kitchen like a shot and thumping up the stairs to her bedroom.

The quiet that descended over the kitchen in the wake of her departure was full of that charged electricity that you felt right before a thunderstorm.

“Jensen,” Jared eventually broke the stalemate.

“Jared, I want to do this. I can take care of her and you know I won’t let anything bad happen. I kept the people serving under me safe and I’ve got way more invested in the two of you than I ever did with them,” he spilled out in a rush. “I know you’ve got a million reasons to be scared, but I’m asking you to trust me here. Believe in me.”

Jared snaked his hand out and grabbed Jensen’s. “I just wanted to say ‘thanks’,“ he croaked. “I,” he paused before correcting himself, “we haven’t ever had someone we could count on completely before. This,” and he looked down at their joined hands where Jensen was rubbing his thumb against Jared’s skin. Apparently, the restless hand syndrome was contagious because Jensen couldn’t remain still while touching him. “This is new and I am scared. But I do trust you,” he rasped harshly. “I do.” And Jensen realized where Jamie got her puppy eyes when Jared turned his toward Jensen.

“Thank you,” Jensen replied solemnly.

Jared laughed wetly and blinked to keep the tears that wanted to spill trapped where they were. “Doesn’t mean I’m not going to text you a million times on Monday.”

“I’d be worried someone had replaced you with a pod person if you didn’t,” Jensen chuckled. Standing up, he walked around the table to pull Jared up into his arms. “Thank you for trusting me, sweetheart.”

Jared ducked his head down and hid his face against Jensen’s neck at the affectionate name. It reminded him of the way Jamie had buried hers in her flowers and was no less endearing. They simply stood in each other’s embrace, processing the huge step they had taken together in their own, separate ways.

*****

The following Monday found Jensen parking by the curb bright and early. Lumber was neatly stacked in the back, ready to be placed after all the post holes he’d dug over the weekend. He
grabbed the ridiculously sweet caffeine drink he’d picked up at Spill The Beans after Misha swore it was a guilty pleasure that Jared treated himself to once in a rare while. Misha also confessed to an ongoing game with him about what ingredient was changed from the last one he’d been served and expected Jensen to report back immediately what Jared had guessed. Jamie was already waiting for him on the front porch, keeping herself busy with a drawing. She waved frantically and then went back inside, loudly heralding Jensen’s arrival. He hadn’t even made it to the steps when Jared came out in a rush, hugging her tight.

“You be good, baby,” he said in a shaky voice. He lifted his head and told Jensen, “There are eggs and toast warming in the oven for the two of you.”

Jensen quirked a brow and Jared brushed it off. “Can’t eat,” he admitted. “I’m too nervous.”

Smiling, Jensen held out the steaming cup for Jared, watching his eyes light up when he recognized the logo. Clasping it gratefully in one hand, while he adjusted the messenger bag slung over his shoulder with the other, he inhaled deeply. Jensen used the opportunity to take a closer look at his omega.

Dressed in neatly pressed khakis and a sky-blue, button down, Jared was the epitome of preppy style. He’d even managed to tame his wild bangs, which, if he was honest with himself, Jensen thought was woefully tragic. But he was definitely rockin’ the professional look to a “T” and Jensen whistled lowly.

Jared sputtered while swallowing and had to hastily cup a hand under his chin so he didn’t spill coffee all over his shirt. “Jensen,” he coughed, sounding scandalized.

“I can’t help it, sweetheart. You look hot.”

“You kind of do, Mommy,” Jamie offered helpfully from the porch. “Maybe you should wear a t-shirt. It’s cooler that way.”

Jensen lowered his head to hide his chuckles. She was priceless.

“Thanks for the suggestion, baby, but I don’t think the school would find it appropriate. Remember what we talked about,” he reminded her.

Nodding solemnly, she said, “Follow the rules and don’t ever give them a reason to find something wrong.”

Jensen’s jaw clenched at that, but he held his tongue. “You do look good,” he murmured as Jared walked past him to his car. “Makes me want to play naughty student to your professor. Tell me, prof, do you spank your bad pupils?”

Jared blushed all the way to the roots of his hair and scrambled to get in his car. Rolling down his window, he held up the cup. “Thank you for this,” but it was clear he meant more than the beverage.

“Anything for you,” Jensen replied, leaning in the window and stealing a kiss. “Mm,” he hummed appreciatively, “You taste sweet.”

“It’s Misha’s caramel cappuccino,” he mumbled.

Taking a second bite of the apple, Jensen flicked his tongue against Jared’s Cupid bow mouth. “Nope,” he declared as he straightened up. “That’s all you. Sweet as sugar.” Not wanting to embarrass Jared too much, he thumped his fist on the roof of the Ford. “Now go forth and influence young minds.”
“Aye aye, captain,” he copied his daughter’s favorite line. “If you see Misha again, tell him this was awesome as usual. How’s he feeling? Over his cold yet?”

“Misha’s feeling better and decidedly feminine today.”

The beta originally hailed from Boston, but had lived in Winnegance long enough to also hold the coveted title of “From Away”. Misha abhorred labels, including “gender fluid” even though that came the closest to describing them most of the time.

“Well, let her know I can tell she added more cinnamon this time,” Jared replied without missing a beat. “She can’t fool me.” He rolled his lower lip in and darted his eyes toward the porch.

“I’ve got her, Jared,” he said gently, understanding how hard it was for him to leave his daughter behind.

Jared jerked his chin sharply once. “I should be back by 4 at the latest since I don’t have sports. If I end up running late, I’ll call you.”

“Call me anyways,” Jensen told him as he leaned back through the window to brush his fingers against Jared’s high cheekbone. “I like the sound of your voice.”

Jared ducked his head and hummed his agreement, apparently not trusting himself to speak. Jensen stepped back and let him pull out of the driveway. As he stood on the porch, both he and Jamie waved until Jared’s Ford puttered around the corner and out of sight. Jensen was torn between worry and pride, vaguely wondering if this was kind of like what a parent felt when they sent their child off to school for the first time.

“Well, kiddo,” he drawled, slinging an arm around Jamie’s petite shoulders, “how about we have some of that breakfast your mother made for us and then we tackle our fence?”

She nodded her head much the same way her mother had. “Sounds like a plan.”

He grinned and ruffled her hair, enjoying the angry squawk she made when he did.

*****

Jensen didn’t have to wonder long about what a parent felt when they let their child go the first time. The very next week, he knew firsthand.

His time with Jamie had gone off without a hitch. She was a good girl and kept her word to follow Jensen’s instructions and requests to the letter. And while they hadn’t had a single problem, Jensen was a nervous wreck by the end of the week. He had no idea what it was like to be responsible for a child. Sure, he had convinced himself he could handle it after all his years in the service dealing with the greenest recruits, but this was lightyears apart from that. The people serving under him, while relying on his leadership, were adults. They were self-sufficient, autonomous beings that Jensen could turn his back on. Jamie was not.

She didn’t know her own limits and Jensen had to be very careful to tailor his requests and jobs for her to match her abilities and not cave in when she wanted to do bigger and more complicated things than she could handle. He had no desire to stifle her, but he also didn’t want to set her up for failure. And since they were actively involved in physical tasks, he watched her every move like a hawk. His desire to protect her was a confusing mixture of his promise to Jared and his own alpha nature for a child he was starting to see as his own. More than once during that week, he had to remind himself that Jared did this all the time for her back in Texas while working and attending school. His admiration for the omega grew exponentially.
But they made it and by the week’s end, Jared only called and texted a dozen times a day. They were all learning together.

Sunday night, after Jamie had been tucked in and Jensen was saying his reluctant goodnight on the porch step, Jared confessed that the principal had called an early meeting the next day and he wasn’t going to be able to follow Jamie’s bus to school on her first day.

“Stupid, huh?” Jared huffed. “I’m sad I can’t be a weird stalker-mom.”


And it was. Right at 7 a.m., Jensen pushed down the kickstand of his bike and pulled off his helmet. He pulled the single, purple aster out of his pack and walked up to the front door as Jared was hustling Jamie out.

“Jensen, wha –” Jared gasped, surprised to see him.

“Jensen, it’s my first day of school and you’re here,” Jamie declared happily. She looked as pretty as a picture in her little, denim skirt and lavender blouse, Pokémon backpack firmly in place and sweater tied around her waist.

“I know, honey,” he said as he squatted down, riding leathers creaking with the action. “And you know I like to give my favorite people something special on their first day.”

“But I don’t drink coffee,” she replied worriedly.

“I know. That’s why you get this instead,” he reassured her, handing her the flower. It had a water-filled tube on the bottom to last the day.

“Thank you,” she breathed out and accepted the blossom, clutching it close. “Mommy, do you see?”

“I see, baby, I see,” he exhaled shakily. “You’re such a lucky girl.”

“I am,” she decreed knowingly.

“If it’s okay with you,” Jensen asked, “would you mind if I followed your bus this morning? I’ve got some errands to run in that direction, but I don’t want to bug you or anything.”

“Oh, that’s okay, Jensen. I don’t mind. Then you won’t get lost if you follow me.”

“Great,” he exclaimed.

“Baby, why don’t you wait on the sidewalk for the bus? I just want to tell Jensen something.” He leaned down and kissed her, straightening her pack as she scampered off.

Jensen shifted his helmet from one hand to the other. “I hope it’s –”

He didn’t get any further than that. Jared fisted his leather jacket in one hand and jerked him close. “You’re unbelievable,” he whispered and kissed Jensen hard.

Jensen didn’t hesitate, but wrapped his free arm around Jared’s narrow waist and held him close, tilting his head to get a better angle at his lips. He bit gently and sucked on Jared’s lower one before he let him go as West Bath’s Elementary School bus chugged into view.
Jared pulled his phone out of his pocket and took several pictures as Jamie waved to them before darting onto the bus. Jensen pretended not to notice the wetness around his ever-changing eyes.

“Get moving so you’re not late for your meeting,” Jensen teased him, trying to distract him by lightly slapping his ass.

Jared jumped and Jensen was about to apologize until he saw the flicker of something needy pass across the omega’s face. Jensen winked at him before turning away, pulling on his helmet on the way to his bike. He gave Jared a small salute as his revved the Indian and took off after Jamie’s bus, not that it was much of a chase. He barely made it out of second gear as he followed the squat, yellow monstrosity while it made its necessarily slow and careful pass through the neighborhood on the way to the only elementary school in their township. A couple of times he thought he saw Jamie glance back at him through the back window, but by the time they arrived at school, he figured he had imagined it.

Parking not too far behind the bus, Jensen balanced his helmet on the gas tank and fished out his phone from inside his jacket, fingers brushing against the other dog tag he’d taken to wearing again under his shirts. He had the camera app ready the moment Jamie stepped out of the bus and clicked off a half-dozen or so pictures. She was busy talking to a little, blond-haired boy, waving her free hand emphatically with every word she said. Jensen laughed to himself, since it was clear he had been all but forgotten. Apparently, only grown-ups found the first day of school traumatic. But then she turned around, nervous smile in place and holding her flower close. When he waved back, she eagerly pointed him out to her new friend, who was standing a little too close in Jensen’s opinion. He straightened up from where he was straddling his bike and gave the boy a serious glare. The kid swallowed and shifted slightly away from Jamie when they walked into the building. He felt marginally better about that, but realized his low-level unease was still there. He knew she’d be fine and he was proud of how brave she was about this new phase in her life. Still didn’t change the fact that he kind of wished he could poke his head inside just for a minute or two to scope the place out and make sure she was okay.

Sighing, he flipped through the pictures he had taken and decided on three to send Jared. But since Jared might still be driving, he decided to sit on his bike a while longer in front of the school. After all, he didn’t want Jared to think something was wrong and check his phone while he was behind the wheel. So, he made sure to give Jared a solid thirty minutes for his four mile drive to work, convincing himself that that was perfectly logical math.

Yeah. He didn’t really believe it, either.

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Despite the momentous events, September disappeared into October before Jensen knew it. Jared had been kind of an understandable wreck with both him and his daughter the new kids on the block. Jamie had it somewhat easier, since school was brand new for all her classmates. But Jensen got hints that she was still the odd person out because almost everyone else had grown up together. There was one notable exception – that blond kid. Turned out that he was the alpha son of one of Jared’s fellow teachers – some equally blond alpha transplant from Canada named Stephen. Apparently, Jensen hadn’t been intimidating enough and David (“He let’s me call him Davy. Isn’t that cute?” Jamie had cooed to him that first week) was her current BFF. Jared had laughed at his distress, promising him that friends came and went at that age, but Jensen wondered if Jared was secretly glad an alpha child had taken to his daughter, since it might mean less bullying during recess. He reluctantly realized that it wasn’t necessarily a bad thing but the kid still seemed shifty to him.

Jared’s burgeoning friendship with Stephen was a different matter. It wasn’t that Jensen didn’t trust
Jared or anything, but he had caught a glimpse of the other alpha the one time Jared’s car had refused to start and he had gone to pick him up after classes. About his height, but younger and slightly less muscular, the biology teacher had been waiting with Jared until Jensen was able to show up, the two of them chatting easily in French. He’d been deferential to Jensen, still holding his bow from his archery class (like that was a sport), explaining he didn’t think it was proper to just leave Jared alone since the omega had refused his offer of a lift and all. And Jensen might have been the tiniest bit curt with him as he’d ushered an obviously distressed Jared into his truck, but he had thanked “Stefan” nonetheless.

Jared had apologized on the way home for inconveniencing Jensen, but Jensen had been quick to disabuse him of the notion that it was a hardship.

“Sweetheart,” he had said, “I’d much rather you call me than take a ride from a stranger.”

“Oh, Stephen,” and Jared had placed a smidgen of emphasis on the correct version of the alpha’s name, “is hardly a stranger. You know, he’s a single parent like I am. His wife found she couldn’t handle raising a child, so he gave her a divorce and dissolved their claim. He’s practically raised Davy since he was a baby. He gets it.”

Jensen had grit his teeth and silently thanked whoever was listening that it wasn’t a long drive, having no desire to hear how wonderful Stefan was for an extended length of time. When they came to a stop in front of Jared’s house, however, he had to know.

“Why didn’t you go with him?” His knuckles were white against the steering wheel, but his voice was calm.

Jared ducked his head and rubbed his hands against his thighs. When he finally answered, his voice was soft but steady. “Because whenever something happens, good or bad, you’re who I think of first. I know I probably should have accepted his offer –”

“No,” he had assured Jared quickly, twisting in his seat and pulling the omega into his arms. “No, you shouldn’t have since I was available.” He kissed Jared tenderly. His tense, bunched muscles relaxed at Jared’s confession. “Always think of me first,” he said between nips and gentle bites along Jared’s chin and jaw.

“I kinda already do,” Jared had grinned, running his fingers through Jensen’s close-cropped hair.

The breakdown had been a blessing in disguise, since it had allowed Jensen the chance to not only rebuild the “carburitto”, which only took him a few hours, but gave Jensen the time he needed while Jared was in class to have the new, all-weather tires he’d ordered from Morgan’s Garage installed. It was only the next day that Jared noticed and, by then, Jensen informed him it was too late to do anything about it since he’d already driven on them (totally not true, but Jared didn’t need to know that).

The next week, a nagging tickle in Jensen’s throat was annoying enough that he popped into Fuller’s Pharmacy to grab some Fisherman’s Friend before his shift started. As he snagged a bag of the strong, menthol lozenges, he noticed Jared standing in line at the prescription window. He was about to go over and surprise him when Kurt Fuller’s annoying voice carried down the aisle.

“I told you this before, Mr. Padalecki,” he said, loud enough for the entire store to hear him. Hard of hearing, the man refused to acknowledge it or use any type of hearing aid. The small sign that asked patrons to kindly wait behind it to protect patient privacy was kind of pointless given the volumes that he spoke at. “I thought I was clear the last time when I said I couldn’t refill your out-of-state prescription. You’re an unmated omega and, as such, Maine State law prohibits me from dispensing
suppressants to you.” He had plastered on his fake, “there’s nothing I can do about it” face that usually pissed Jensen off the few times he had to deal with the man when he needed to pick up alpha pheromone spray for Kim if she was swamped at the pub.

Even from where Jensen was standing, he saw the color slowly rise up Jared’s cheeks. Clearing his throat, Jared pulled out a sheet of paper from his messenger bag. “I understand, Mr. Fuller. But as you can see, I have a notarized waiver filled out by Principal Lehne of Hyde School stating that I pose a public health risk and need to be on the medication for the safety of my students.”

Fuller huffed and tugged on his pristine pharmacist’s smock, but accepted the form, making a show of putting on reading glasses to study the front and back of it. “A whole year’s worth?” he finally exclaimed. “This is going to take a while to fill,” and he disappeared from the window.

Jared was the picture of discomfort and embarrassment as he shuffled from one foot to the other while Fuller grumbled from somewhere in back, noisily shifting boxes around. Nothing like having your sexuality openly exposed in front of strangers. Jensen didn’t want to add to his distress, dropping the lozenges back on the shelf and ducking out of the store before he could be spotted.

Walking back to the pub, it slowly sunk in all the tiny battles that Jared had to fight on a nearly daily basis solely based on his biology. Taken one at a time, they weren’t impossible to deal with, but for everything to be an everyday struggle had to be exhausting.

He was deep enough in thought when he took over after Kim’s shift that even she remarked on it.

“Trouble in paradise?” she half-joked, adoring the Padaleckis almost as much as Jensen did. His growing relationship with Jared was the highlight of her days recently and she wasn’t used to seeing him so serious.

Coughing into the crook of his arm, Jensen shook his head. “Just got a lot on my mind. It’s okay, though,” he managed to tack on, not wanting her to worry.

She hummed, but he could tell she wasn’t really convinced. Tossing him her rag, she flipped the bar flap open so she could leave. Briana, long hair swinging around her shoulders, was off-duty and pulled her into a happy kiss. At the other end of the bar, Ben and Callum sneered at the open display of affection between the two alphas.

“…won’t be legal once we’ve got a real alpha back in the White House,” he caught Callum muttering to Ben.

“Yeah, it’ll be a relief when things finally get back to the way they’re supposed to be,” Ben agreed.

When hell freezes over, Jensen thought. But he was going to be glad when the election was over and all the backbiting got packed up and put away again. Although he didn’t really talk about it with Jared too much, he knew it was always at the forefront of the omega’s mind. And after what he witnessed today...if that was the example of a more liberal government at work, he shuddered to think what a conservative one would spell for Jared.

Polishing a pint glass, Jensen wondered if things had never seemed that bad to him before because he was a member of the “privileged” class, Hepburn’s Tracy Lords speech echoing in his head.

“What have classes to do with it? What do they matter except for the people in them?”

And wasn’t that a lofty, fine opinion from someone who had it all? It was easy to say it shouldn’t matter when nothing every really touched you.

So wrapped up in his musings, he barely noticed when Kim and Briana left for the night. It was a
good thing it was a slow evening, because Jensen wasn’t really aware of much beyond the bad taste in his mouth and his troubling reflections.

He didn’t see Jared much that week. He was in the process of grading his students’ first paper. They had finished up reading John Knowles’ *A Separate Peace*. Jensen vaguely remembered reading that coming-of-age story back in high school, but couldn’t recollect many of the details. Jared had assigned his class the task of deciding why omega Gene had jostled the branch, causing his best friend, alpha Phineas, to fall into the river and break his leg. He had explained there were no right or wrong answers, but they would be graded on how effectively they defended their positions. Over a rare glass of wine, Jared had confessed to Jensen it was a hard assignment for him to deal with.

“Some of these kids,” he said with a shake of his head, “blame Gene’s actions on what they consider his inherent, inferior mentality. And what’s worse, they have centuries of historical precedent to back them up on how emotionally unstable omegas are.”

He took another sip of his Cabernet, swirling the wine hypnotically. “It’s just a bitter pill to swallow to read how lowly some of them think of omegas.” He leaned into Jensen’s arm, where they were both relaxing on his couch. Jensen absently played with the curls at the nape of Jared’s neck.

“Why’d you have them read it?” he asked softly.

“Didn’t,” Jared snorted into his glass, bare foot brushing against Jensen’s propped up on the coffee table. “Principal Lehne thought it was a great learning opportunity for them to read the story with an omega instructor at the helm. Honestly, I think the man just wanted to fuck with me.”

Jensen stilled his fingers. Jared almost never swore. He didn’t know if it was the alcohol talking, but he was glad that Jared trusted himself enough around him to share what he was really thinking.

“I know the only reason I was hired was because I was an omega. Don’t get me wrong,” he paused to pour himself a second glass. He held the bottle over Jensen’s half-empty one, but he waved Jared off. Not only was he driving, he had been unusually tired the last week and didn’t want to chance it. “I know I have the right qualifications, but he simply wanted to be able to tout how inclusive their faculty was and I’m the token omega that completed his diversity set.”

Shifting so that he was facing Jared head on, Jensen brushed a few strands of Jared’s hair away from his eyes. He was pleasantly rosy from the wine and more loose-limbed than Jensen had ever seen him before, almost nuzzling into the touch. “Why’d you accept the position?”

Jared leaned closer, tripping his fingers up and down Jensen’s thigh. “Location, location, location,” he grinned.

“Wanted to get out of Texas that bad, huh?” He understood the need to get as far away from home as possible, but he had also come to understand why an omega would want to get the hell out of a red state like Texas.

“That was part of it,” Jared conceded, continuing to unintentionally tease Jensen with his innocently provocative touches. “But Maine was a good spot for us. I just didn’t anticipate falling in love…with the place,” he tacked on hastily, almost gulping down the entire content of his glass in one go.

Jensen’s heart literally skipped a beat. He was sure he was in love with Jared and now he had confirmation that the omega felt the same way even if he wasn’t ready to say the words to him yet. He traced his finger around the outer curve of Jared’s ear, staring deeply into those eyes that continuously mesmerized him.
Jared set his glass down on the coffee table, the remainder of the wine sloshing up the sides and coating them in red. “Jensen,” he whispered, all but climbing onto the alpha’s lap. Their positions reminded Jensen of their first time on the water and he pulled Jared the rest of the way onto him. It was awkward with Jared’s beautifully long legs, but they made it work. The two of them exchanged slow, wet kisses. Arousal burned, but it was muted and comfortably distant enough not to drive Jensen into a frenzy. Running his hands up and down Jared’s back, brushing against the knobs of his spine, Jensen was content to end the evening there. But Jared wanted more.

The omega tripped his naughty fingers down Jensen’s chest, poking and prodding at the firm muscles he couldn’t seem to get enough of. When they skipped across Jensen’s nipples, Jensen hissed in pained pleasure. Suddenly that arousal wasn’t all that distant. He threaded a hand into Jared’s hair and pulled him into a hungry kiss. Their teeth rattled against each other as they twisted their heads to get a better angle like they were trying to climb into each other. Jensen licked along the seam of Jared’s mouth and the omega moaned softly. Jensen took the opportunity to plunge inside, twisting his tongue with Jared’s in what was less a battle of dominance, but more of a subtle dance between their limber muscles. Jensen tickled the roof of Jared’s mouth, caressed his sharp teeth and when Jared pulled back enough to suck on Jensen’s tongue, his toes curled with pleasure. His erection pushed against the button fly of his jeans and Jensen was about to go out of his mind with want. Reluctantly, he nudged Jared back.

“What?” Jared gasped, lovely in his aroused confusion.

“I need for us to slow down,” he said lowly.

“But,” and he pointed to the walkie-talkie device on the table, “we’ll hear Jamie if she wakes up.” Jared had taken to using the baby monitor he had. It only picked up sound, but since he used the living room as a temporary office once school started, he wanted to make sure he heard Jamie if she needed anything. For her part, Jamie liked the monitor in her room. It resembled an owl and she said that it keeping an eye on her made her feel safe.

Dragging his thumb along Jared’s cherry-red, lower lip, he reluctantly admitted, “It’s not that. I just don’t want us to go further the first time when we’re both not one hundred percent here.”

“Huh?” Jared murmured.

“You’re a little worse – or better – for the wine. And there are rules about that,” Jensen paraphrased, hoping Jared would recognize the reference.

For a minute, Jared only squinted at him. That curious array of wrinkles appeared between his brows before he slowly smiled. “Thank you, Mike. I think men are wonderful,” he quoted.

With a great deal of reticence, Jensen kissed Jared a final time. “I’ll see myself out,” he told him as Jared curled into the couch. “Maybe we can do something this weekend after you get through those papers,” he indicated the pile of ungraded essays awaiting Jared’s red pen.

“Thank you, Mike. I think men are wonderful,” he quoted.

Smile just a shade sad, Jared nodded while Jensen laced on his boots. He threw Jared a wink as he left, a sneeze catching him off guard once he was outside. An early night would do them both some good, he told himself and his indignant erection. He meant what he’d said. While a drunken tumble would be incredibly enjoyable, he didn’t want anything like that between them until after they’d established a physical relationship. He never wanted Jared to think he’d been taken advantage of and Jensen needed to know that Jared was fully onboard when they took the inevitable, next step.
The rest of the week passed in a fog. Jensen was sorry that he didn’t get to see Jared or Jamie and yet at the same time, he couldn’t seem to shake himself out of the funk he was in and was grateful the two didn’t see him like this. When he took over for Kim on Friday night, he didn’t notice the concerned look she gave him and was none the wiser when his alpha partner made a surreptitious call before she left for the evening.

Locking up that night, Jensen was hardly aware of making his way upstairs and crashing on the couch. He had barely closed his eyes when there was an insistent knock on his door. “What?” he croaked, voice shot like he’d smoked a pack of cigarettes.

“Just me,” Kim called out.

Struggling to push himself up on his elbows, Jensen demanded roughly, “Is everything okay? I only locked up.”

“Everything’s fine,” she assured him. “I’m getting ready to open for lunch.”

One eye squinted shut, Jensen tried to make sense of what she was saying, because Jensen had just closed the pub. “Wha?” was all he managed.

“It’s Saturday, Jens,” she informed him. “Everything is fine, but you have a couple of visitors who are eager to see you.”

Jensen swung his legs onto the floor, the sudden change in elevation making his head spin. Running a hand roughly through his hair, Jensen noticed Jared and Jamie standing behind the other alpha. “Hey, guys,” he smiled, wincing as he tried to swallow.

“I’ll leave you all to it,” Kim waved, patting Jared on the arm when she left.

“Thank you for calling,” he heard Jared tell her.

“Wha?” Jensen got out again, feeling terribly muddled.

“You sound like a frog, Jensen,” Jamie informed him.

“I do?” He tried to grin, but it was a struggle.

“Jamie, take this into the kitchen over there,” Jared directed his daughter, handing her a grocery bag.

“Okie dokie, Mommy,” the youngster chirped, skipping across the room.

“Lie back down,” Jared said softly, pressing against Jensen’s broad shoulders with his slender fingers.

“Trying to get me on my back, huh?” he joked, chuckling until his laughter morphed into a coughing fit. “Think maybe I’m sick. You two shouldn't be here,” he realized, struggling to sit back up again. But those same hands directed him back into the couch with firm strength.

“We’ve both had our ‘flu shots, so we should be fine. You need to take it easy,” he admonished Jensen. And Jensen wanted to protest, but then those cool fingers were combing through his hair gently and they felt so damn good that Jensen told himself he was going to close his eyes for a few minutes. Vaguely, he felt the tender brush of lips against his sweaty forehead before he was out for the count.

When Jensen woke again, the light was shining in low through his window, indicating it was
afternoon already. Rolling over on the couch, he realized there was a quilt placed carefully around him. He couldn’t stop the stupid grin that blossomed on his face, knowing that Jared had tucked him in. Sitting up slowly, he spotted Jamie asleep on the recliner to the right of the sofa. She was also covered up and blissfully unaware, mouth open and snoring lightly. There were several drawings scattered across his table, completely at odds with his analy neat stack of magazines, and it was a welcome sight. Apparently, she had been busy while he’d slept.

Quietly shuffling through them, he recognized one of himself conked out on the sofa and another of him sleeping and what he thought was Jared sitting on the floor beside the couch watching him. His smile threatened to crack his face wide open as he contemplated Jared keeping vigil beside him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so cared for and he blamed the burning behind his eyes on his cold. He glanced around, but didn’t see Jared. He did, however, smell something heavenly wafting in from his kitchen and was surprised, because absolutely nothing had smelled remotely edible the last, few days.

“You’re awake,” came a soft voice behind him.

Twisting around, Jensen smiled ruefully. “Jury’s still out on that one.”

“Think you could try and eat something?” Jared wondered hopefully.

“If it is some of whatever is making that delicious smell, I’m willing to give it a shot,” he rasped.

“You stay right there,” Jared urged him, “and I’ll bring you some.”

Jensen smiled and sank back into the couch. His body ached all over and his throat was like sandpaper, but he snuggled into the quilt, content.

When he dragged his eyes open again, Jared was carefully stacking the drawings aside. “I brought you some water and juice. Wasn’t sure what you might like, but the juice has lots of vitamin C, so I’d go with that.”

On the table were several glasses and a steaming bowl that had his mouth watering. When he pulled the bowl close, he thought it was chicken soup, but none like he’d ever had before. The noodles were vermicelli and there were tons of greens floating in the broth along with shredded chicken and a few things he couldn’t immediately identify. On a side plate were lime wedges and other vegetable toppings. Taking an experimental sip, Jensen was surprised that not only could he actually taste the fragrant flavors, they were delicious. He croaked out as much as he eagerly dug in.

Jared was practically beaming at the praise. “There’s lemongrass and chilies in there, not to mention coriander, turmeric and fresh ginger. It’s a recipe I got from one of my roommates back in Texas. Always seemed to fix Jamie right up when she got the sniffles.” A ding rang out from the kitchen and Jared darted out of the room, only to return a minute later with a cloth wrapped bundle on a large plate. “Biscuits,” he revealed, flipping back a corner of the dish towel. They were rich and buttery, with hints of garlic, kind of like the ones they served at Red Lobster. Jensen grabbed for one as he drained the last of his soup.

“Could I have some more?” he blushed, glancing down at his empty bowl.

Jared laughed lightly, keeping his voice down since Jamie was still napping. “Sure thing, Oliver.”

He returned not only with a full bowl, but aspirin, NyQuil and cough drops, too. “Now that you’ve got something in you, at least take some aspirin and see if you can knock down that fever.”

“I don’t have a fever,” Jensen argued and then shivered.
“Mmm,” Jared hummed, refilling his juice glass. Jamie yawned loudly from where she was nestled into the recliner.

“How are you feeling?” she asked Jensen sleepily.

“Better, baby, now that you two are here,” he replied.

She crawled off the recliner to sit on the floor on the opposite side of the coffee table as Jensen. “That’s Mommy’s famous ‘get better’ soup,” she explained eagerly. “It works every time.”

“I can already feel it working,” he promised her, but coughed harshly after.

Jamie scowled. “Less talking and more soup,” she ordered him.

Jared shrugged and hid a smirk. “You heard the lady.”

While Jensen dutifully worked on his second bowl, Jamie explained each of her drawings to him and Jensen tried to comment when appropriate, but his voice was pretty shot. “Shh,” she said with a tiny finger pressed to her mouth. “I’ll talk, you listen.”

She climbed up onto the couch with him while Jared cleared away the dishes, leaving a glass and a bottle of water in easy reach along with the assortment of medicine that wasn’t Jensen’s on the table. Jensen tried to pay attention to what she was saying, but Jared was singing quietly off key as he washed the dishes and Jensen was kind of entranced by it.

“Mommy,” Jamie shouted, “I think Jensen is getting sleepy.”

Jared came around the couch, wiping his hands on his jeans. “He’s not going to stay that way if you don’t use your indoor voice.”

“Oops,” Jamie gulped, slapping her hands over her mouth. “You’re still sleepy, right?” she prodded Jensen.

“I am, honey,” he reassured her.

“We should probably head out,” Jared said uncertainly. “Let you get some real rest.”

“Or you could stay and watch a movie with me,” Jensen croaked. “I think I’ve got Finding Dory on DVD.”

“Finding Dory?” Jamie gasped, eyes rounding out in delight.

“That isn’t even out yet,” Jared said, eyeing Jensen skeptically. And Jensen might have called in a favor from a Navy buddy whose brother was an illustrator at Pixar to get an advanced copy when he heard how anxious Jamie was to see the film.

“I have my ways,” Jensen replied mysteriously as Jamie was already scouring through his DVD collection for it.

“Here it is,” she squealed, waving the box with the blue tang on the cover. Then her face got serious. “I should probably use the potty first.”

“Right past the kitchen, the first door on the left in the hallway,” Jensen said.

“I better make sure she can find it,” Jared suggested.
“Mommy,” the tiny omega glowered at him, “I can find it by myself.”

“All right,” Jared placated her, raising his hands up.

As she marched off in a huff, Jared sat beside Jensen. He almost seemed reluctant.

“Everything okay?” Jensen rasped and then sneezed.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?”

“Next time you can. Now spill.”

Dropping his head so that his long bangs fell like a curtain over his eyes, Jared mumbled, “I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to stay after the other night.” He sucked in his upper lip nervously.

“Sweetheart,” Jensen said softly, “you have no idea how hard it was to walk away from you the other night. I just want the first time we go further with each other for both of us to be on the same page. That’s all. Because, and trust me on this, you’re going to want to remember everything I do to you in vivid Technicolor.”

“Jensen,” he exhaled, but was stopped from saying anything else as Jamie hopped back into the room. She plopped down between them and Jensen shared his quilt with her.

“I’m ready,” she informed the men before staring at her mother. “Mommy, are you getting Jensen’s cold? You’re all red in the face.”

“No, baby,” Jared fidgeted, “I don’t think so. It just got hot in here for a second.”

Nodding her head, she agreed. “Jensen is pretty hot.”

“Yes, he definitely heats up the whole room,” Jared admitted as he got up to insert the DVD into Jensen’s home theater system.

“Your bathroom is so clean, Jensen. It’s like no one lives here,” she remarked while Jared fiddled with the sound.

“Some people clean up after themselves without having to be told to,” Jared said from where he was squatting in front of the television.

“I don’t know what you mean, Mommy. Shh, the movie’s starting.” And Jamie effectively shut her mother down.

The three of them settled down to watch Dory try to find her parents. Jared fussed for a while, making sure Jensen had enough blankets, enough water and plied him with more than one of the medicines lined up like soldiers on his table. Jensen scowled, but obliged the omega by swallowing the foul-tasting stuff grumpily. His mood did not affect Jared, who smiled indulgently like Jensen was a difficult toddler. And maybe he was, but it was the first time in too long when Jensen didn’t have to do a thing and someone took care of him. It felt good. Jared also managed to make sure Jamie had a bowl of soup and a couple of biscuits while she stared – mesmerized – by the images playing out in front of her.

The food and the hour conspired against her and Jamie didn’t make it to the end of the film. She drifted off before Hank, the seven-armed octopus, crashed the truck into the ocean, freeing all the critters inside. They’d have to watch it again so she could see they all escaped unharmed. With the credits running, Jared turned toward him.
“Well, I guess we should get going.” He sounded regretful.

“I guess,” Jensen agreed. He coughed into his arm noisily, not missing the way Jared winced at the sound.

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay?” Jared worried.

Jensen grabbed a tissue from the pack Jared had brought him and blew his nose wetly. “I’ll be fine,” he grated out.

“I really don’t feel good about leaving you alone tonight,” Jared confessed, picking at a rip in his jeans.

Jensen tried not to smile; he might have exaggerated his symptoms just then. “You and Jamie could sleep here. I only need to change the sheets on the bed for you.”

“We couldn’t take your bed, Jensen.”

“’Course you can. I’m fine out here for another night.” He spoke lowly, not wanting to wake Jamie up. “I’ve got new toothbrushes under the sink in the master bath and you guys can help yourself to some of my t-shirts and sweats to sleep in.” And to seal the deal, he coughed again.

Gnawing at the corner of his mouth, Jared eventually agreed. “We can stay tonight, but I’ll change the sheets. Just tell me where the clean ones are.”

Once Jared had left, Jensen pulled Jamie closer, breathing in her peppermint scent. She murmured in her sleep and snuggled into his chest, hand grabbing for his dog tag. He pressed a kiss on top of her curls. For feeling so crappy, he’d never been happier.

“All set,” Jared said quietly. “Let me get her settled before I say goodnight.” Jared plucked Jamie out of Jensen’s arms. She woke up for about twenty seconds.

“Night, Jensen. Feel better,” she yawned.

“I already do, honey.”

As soon as the two left, Jensen stretched out on the couch. He wasn’t lying when he said he’d be fine with it. Large enough to accommodate a person as tall as Jensen and then some, he normally enjoyed sinking into its well-worn comfort, but it was tough this evening. His back, shoulders and neck ached relentlessly, probably from the damn ‘flu he finally acknowledged having caught. He rolled onto his stomach, smothering his groan into a throw pillow, trying to stretch out his shoulders. He had resigned himself to being unable to find a comfortable position when those lovely, long fingers were back. Jensen twisted his head around, trying to catch a glimpse of Jared, but the omega gently guided him back to the pillow.

Jensen’s groans morphed from ones of discomfort to sublime pleasure. Jared worked his fingers knowingly into the knots and tight muscles along the length of his neck, before they slid down to his waist. “Huh?” Jensen mumbled.

“Shh,” Jared soothed as he walked his clever digits up under Jensen’s shirt, rucking it up in the process. The air felt good against his overheated skin. Then those delightfully cool hands worked some kind of magic on his aching back, releasing every last bit of tension from his shoulders.

“Thank you,” he barely got out. There was more he wanted to say, but the last thing he remembered was Jared sweetly kissing the nape of his neck.
Jensen wasn’t sure exactly what time it was when he managed to pry his eyes open. The whole place was shrouded in darkness, except for the faint, warm glow from the light above the stove. Jensen closed his eyes and huffed out a laugh. Jared had apparently been loath to leave him completely disoriented and had left the light on for him. Rolling onto his side, he noticed there was a note folded tent-like on the table. Picking it up, he shifted onto his back again, holding the paper high enough to catch that thoughtful glow from the kitchen.

_The soup is on low if you wake up feeling hungry and there is another batch of biscuits in the oven staying warm. At least stay hydrated and drink another glass of water for me._

_Sleep sweet,_

_J2_

Jensen placed the piece of paper carefully back on the table, beside the full glass of water that was waiting for him. He decided he needed to empty his bladder before tanking up again. Sitting up gingerly, he was pleasantly surprised to notice his back didn’t ache as badly and then his face heated up for an entirely different reason than the ‘flu. He couldn’t believe he had fallen asleep while Jared had been touching him like that. Jensen scrubbed his face roughly and sighed, wanting to kick himself over sleeping through something wonderful like that.

He pushed to his feet and staggered toward the bathroom to relieve himself. Splashing water over his face, he dragged his freshly-washed hands through his hair and massaged the back of his neck. He really did feel better. Not great, but like he was over the worst of it. Drying his hands and turning off the light, he was about to head into the kitchen for another bowl of that fantastic soup when he decided on a small detour. Silently padding down the hallway, he stopped before his bedroom door. It wasn’t closed and Jensen noticed there was a faint light in the room. Carefully pushing the door open, he leaned against the frame and took in the sight before him.

Jared had left the en suite bathroom light on, but shut the door most of the way, leaving a narrow beam to cut across the room as a nightlight. He and Jamie were curled up in each other in the center of his bed. Jamie had on one of his old Navy shirts, which was effectively a nightgown on her, hands tucked under her cheek. Jared was between her and the door, protectively wrapped around her smaller body. He was wearing a plain, white t-shirt and a pair of Jensen’s sweats. They were the threadbare ones that he had hopelessly knotted the string, but could still shimmy up over hips and therefore refused to toss. Jared’s waist was narrower and they were canted crookedly on his hips, exposing a sharp bone and a tantalizing span of flesh.

Seeing the two of them in his bed settled a primitive aspect of his nature and the warmth that flooded his body as he watched his family sleep had nothing to do with his receding fever and everything to with to do with his feelings for them.

Rapping his knuckles gently against the doorframe, Jensen retreated to the kitchen to have another bowl of Jared’s “get better” soup. When he finally slipped back under the quilt, he fell back to sleep almost immediately. Having the two people he cared about the most under his roof, he slept better than he could ever remember.

Chapter End Notes

_We are definitely heading into the final arc of the story._
And for those who have asked, here is the recipe for that fragrant chicken soup. It really is delicious and when you're congested, you can actually taste it.
“Since my last weekend off was a bust for us, I thought I’d take you both somewhere fun this time,” he told Jared and Jamie as he walked them out to his truck, completely recovered from his brief bout with the ‘flu due, in no small part, to the loving care he’d received from the two of them.

“A bust?” Jamie wondered, wrinkling her face up like she’d sucked on a lemon. Jared was kneeling in front of her, buttoning up her denim jacket.

“A bust means that nothing special happened,” Jensen explained. “You guys were stuck taking care of me. That’s not fun.”

“Not fun? We had the best sleepover ever! We ate on the couch. We stayed in our PJs all morning and watched Finding Dory. Twice,” she exclaimed, waving two fingers in the air beside her mother’s head in case Jensen was confused. “It was wicked awesome!” Jared, satisfied she was set, got up and brushed off the knees of his jeans.

Letting out a loud laugh, Jensen admitted, “Well, when you put it like that, I stand corrected. Let’s just say that I hope this weekend tops that one, okay?”

Shaking her head and shrugging her shoulders, Jamie countered, “I don’t know how, but we can try.”

As Jensen opened the door to his truck, Jared said, “I’ll just go get Jamie’s car seat. We can jury-rig something for today.”

Jensen gently caught his wrist, stopping him from leaving. “I’ve got it covered,” he explained, opening the door further and pointing with his chin for Jared to take a closer look.

“Wow, a booster seat,” Jamie exclaimed. “That’s a ‘big girl’ chair, Mommy.”

Nestled under the newly-installed shoulder belt was a high back booster seat. It was the next step up from Jamie’s current car seat and one the sales person in Portland assured him would be the last one she would need. The style was reminiscent of a racing car bucket seat and, in black and red, didn’t look too shabby in Jensen’s opinion. “What do you think?” he asked Jared, hoping the omega thought it was good enough for his daughter.

“Jensen,” he breathed, fingering the decidedly custom belt that had ruined the truck’s vintage bench seat. It was the one, glaring thing not stock on the otherwise pristine pick-up. And it hadn’t been there the last time Jared had ridden with him. “You shouldn’t have,” he added guiltily.

Lifting Jamie up and getting her settled in the new seat like an expert, Jensen tossed over his shoulder, “Of course I should’ve. How else will I drive my little lady around in style?” And he tweaked her nose, making her giggle helplessly. He deftly attached all the straps, tugging on them a final time to make sure they were snug enough and that he hadn’t caught her hair in anything, since it was loose and kind of everywhere today. “You’re gonna have to slide in on my side, sweetheart,” he
whispered up into Jared’s ear as he closed the passenger door firmly.

Walking around the back of the truck bed, Jared tugged him into a hug. “Your pick-up,” he whispered brokenly, unable to meet Jensen’s gaze, and he buried his head in the crook of Jensen’s neck. Jensen felt the puffs of warm air along his skin as Jared scented him and soothed himself in the process.

“Was missing a seat belt,” Jensen murmured into his ear. “Now it’s perfect.” He tilted Jared’s chin, giving him a quick but firm kiss. “I stopped by Briana’s to make sure it was installed correctly. Since there are no airbags in the truck, she’s safe and that setup meets the state’s legal requirements for all children,” he finished, stressing the inclusive adjective. “Now, let’s hurry up and hit the road,” he said, slipping reluctantly out of Jared’s warm embrace and urging him around to the driver’s side. Opening the door, he waved him forward.

When Jared climbed into the cab, Jensen couldn’t resist and fondled his ass as the tall omega tried to get situated. Startled, Jared let out what Jensen was certain the omega would deny was a squeak as he sort of collapsed on the bench. “Just helping you get seated,” Jensen explained innocently, hands raised.

“You should let him,” Jamie chirped from her new seat. “He knows what he’s doing.” She plucked on her safety harness as she spoke like it was evidence of Jensen’s prowess.

“I do,” Jensen said with wide and guileless green eyes.

“Mm hmm,” was all that Jared muttered, blushing.

Smirking devilishly, Jensen fired up his truck. The robin’s egg sky without even a smear of white promised that it would be a perfect day for what he had planned. “We’ve got a bit of a drive,” he informed his passengers, “but I think you’re gonna like it.” He shifted the truck into gear and they rumbled down the road, radio blaring to life. The DJ announced, “I-95 – the rock of Maine. Coming up next, we’ve got a block of Led Zeppelin for you.”

Jensen grimaced, suspecting the classic rock station wouldn’t be Jamie’s speed. She probably was a Katy Perry or, groaning internally, a Miley Cyrus fan. As he was reaching for the dial to find something more suitable, the distinctive, opening chord progression of “Stairway to Heaven” filled the cab with its melancholy tune.

“Oh, pretty,” Jamie remarked.

“You like?” he asked the little girl, resting his hand on the stick shift instead of changing the station.

“Uh huh,” she mumbled, already trying to hum the tune and drumming her fingers against the sides of her new seat.

Jensen glanced at Jared, who only shrugged back at him in surprise. Grinning that she was giving Zeppelin a chance, Jensen rapped his thumbs against the steering wheel, nodding along to the classic like Jamie was.

For the first part of the morning, they stuck to Highway 1. As he expected, there was some traffic since it was prime leaf peeping season, the skies were clear and the weather pleasantly mild. But it was manageable and that was why he wanted them out on the road as early as possible. He realized, as they drove along and Jamie would take a brief pause from her rock band related line of questioning (“What kind of name is Aerosmith? Their first concert was at a high school? Who names their high school Nipmuc? Would they play at my school?”) to point out the leaves (“Look at the
colors. It’s like the trees have turned into rainbows!"), that he’d started to take the autumnal beauty for granted. Showing it off to Jared and Jamie, who were all but plastered against the passenger window with mouths wide open, was like seeing it for the first time all over again. He wondered if that was one of the blessings that came along with children – the chance to fall in love with things a second and third and fourth time?

“Here we are,” he announced after turning down a small, sheltered road that led to an expansive parking lot, which was nestled in woods several miles off the main highway. “Welcome to the Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens.” Although it was mild, Jensen still threw on a fleece vest over his plaid shirt, knowing it could get nippy in the shade. He’d gotten their chimney and fireplace cleaned, not to mention helped Jared get the roof reshingled in the last month. But while their house might be ready for winter, he wasn’t sure if they were. Jamie and Jared had on relatively light jackets and he reminded himself to make sure they had heavier stuff, too. He slammed the door shut and moseyed over to the passenger side where Jared was trying to undo the straps, but wasn’t completely sure how the new style unlatched.

“Mommy, you better let Jensen do it,” Jamie advised him seriously. “He is an expert.”

Shaking his head, brown strands of hair tumbling everywhere, Jared stepped back and made a sweeping gesture to Jensen. “I bow to the know-it-all.”

“As well you should,” Jensen replied smugly as he deftly unsnapped the latches. Jared didn’t need to ever know how many times Jensen had practiced with the contraption under Briana’s watchful eye. He’d sworn multiple times that afternoon that the damn seat was possessed by demons as he’d fought with confusing straps and snaps and buckles. But it had all been worth it in the end, however, to make sure that Jamie was kept safe.

Lowering her to the ground, he was tickled when she moved between the two of them and clasped both their hands, swinging them fiercely when they started walking as a single unit. “What is this?”

“A group of locals decided that this area needed a garden where all the plants of Maine could be appreciated, so they ended up buying almost three hundred acres of tidal shoreland. They planted extra stuff and created hiking trails all through it,” Jensen explained as he paid for their tickets at the entrance. “There are sculptures scattered around and, in the winter, they string everything with holiday lights in every color.”

“We should come then, too,” Jamie decided excitedly, eyeing all the flowers and trees. “And in the summer. I bet there are all kinds of pretty flowers when it’s Mommy’s birthday.”

Smiling down at her before letting his gaze drift back up to Jared, he agreed. “We should come for every season.” The omega gifted him with a shy smile and bobbed his head in agreement.

For the next hour and a half, the three of them followed a gently-sloped and well-maintained trail, marveling at all the jewel-toned colors on display for them. The leaves were at their peak in shades of topaz, ruby and citrine. “So many colors,” Jamie breathed as strained her head back to take it all in. Jensen rubbed the nape of his neck in sympathy. She was going to be sore by lunchtime at this rate.

“Thank you,” Jared said. “I always wanted to take her to Garner State Park when we lived in Texas, but it was so far…” Jensen didn’t need to hear what was left unsaid.

_I was always working and never had any free time or money for it._

“Garner can’t hold a candle to this,” Jensen boasted, “so it’s just as well y’all waited.”
Jamie snickered. “You sounded like a cowboy, Jensen.”

“I’ve got the official boots and hat at home,” he winked at her.

Her eyes got big. “Now you’re in for it,” Jared half-whispered a teasing warning.

“Do you know how to ride a horse? I love horses. Jake’s going to have a pony at his birthday party next month. I hope I get to touch it.” Jensen was constantly amazed at the little girl’s ability to rattle off questions without needing to breathe.

“I did do a little riding back when I lived in Texas,” he told her. “Haven’t had much of a chance to do it around here, though.”

“Why not?”

“You know, I don’t even have a good reason. Just never got around to it, but there are a few places near Winnegance where you can rent horses and go for rides.” Sam Ferris had a small stable and riding school in West Bath. In fact, she was probably the one supplying the pony for that party Jamie mentioned. Jensen made a mental note to ask her about her rates the next time she swung by the pub, after checking with Jared about it.

“You should do it,” Jamie insisted. “And you should wear your hat and boots, too.”

“Not too many cowboys here in Maine,” Jensen smiled.

“That’s why you should. Oh,” she gasped, “you should go as a cowboy for Halloween.”

“No can do, little lady. I’m working that night.”

“But you’ll miss out on all the candy,” Jamie worried. “I’ll save you some of mine. That is,” and she paused to side eye her mother, “if Mommy doesn’t steal too much.”

“I have no idea what you’re insinuating,” Jared declared with fake shock.

“You know what I’m insinuating.” Jamie glared and shook a finger at him.

“Insinuating’,” Jared corrected her automatically, “and I have no idea.”

Twisting around, she informed Jensen, “Mommy is a candy thief, so make sure that you hide whatever I give you or he’ll take it when you’re napping.”

“Stealing candy from your daughter? That’s low, Padalecki.” Jensen shook his head.

As Jared sputtered out a lame excuse for his confectionery kleptomania, the metal bear sculpture that marked the entrance to the gardens returned into view. “Can I go see it?” Jamie asked. Jared hadn’t finished nodding before she tore off. There were groups of families, mostly tourists from what Jensen could see, starting to pour in and a small crowd of kids was gathered around the metal bear; the children were either petting it or trying to climb on its back as their indulgent parents stood around and watched or took pictures.

When he and Jared got close, Jensen noticed a couple of the parents subtly scent the air and then study Jared’s hands and neck. It took Jensen a minute to figure out they were trying to see if he was married or claimed. When they deduced he was neither, the whispering and nudging began. Insecure betas pulled their alpha mates closer, as though merely being around an unclaimed, fertile omega was a threat somehow. Jensen’s hackles rose and he was quick to clasp Jamie’s hand. Jared seemed to be
unaffected, but Jensen knew that was a ruse. The omega was always aware of his surroundings. Always. But he reined everything in to project a calm, strong exterior for Jamie’s sake. He remembered that day in the pharmacy when Jared had to formally state that his very nature as an omega made him a public health risk to be able to buy suppressants on his own. Once again, Jensen wondered how tiring it was for Jared every, single day. It had gotten better in Winnebance, where people were getting to know the small family, but together for the first time out amongst strangers, Jensen was reminded how society at large tended to treat omegas.

Squeezing Jamie’s hand, Jensen leaned down and said, “I don’t know about you two, but I am getting hungry.”

Like he had summoned forth a genie, Jamie’s tummy grumbled loudly enough that the men heard her. “I’m gonna take that as a ‘me, too’. You both ready for the next part of our trip?”

Jamie gave the bear an affectionate pat on the head. “Yup.” She was untouched by the muttering adults nearby, taking her cues from her mother’s calm demeanor.

Pulling his coat tighter around himself like a shield, Jared said, “I think so. But this was wonderful already, Jensen.” Jared was always quick to offer his thanks whenever Jensen did the slightest thing for them. Jensen appreciated and hated it at the same time. He didn’t want to be taken for granted, but he wanted Jared to begin, in a roundabout fashion, to count on certain things from him. A weekend trip for the family should be a given if no one had to work (and even if they did, under the right circumstances). Intellectually, he understood it would take time for the omega to settle into the way his life had changed. Instinctually, it was harder for Jensen. The alpha in him wanting to take and comfort in equal measure was unsettling and was a part of himself he had spent a lifetime trying to control. He’d never felt like this before, but, while it troubled him slightly, he didn’t want the feelings to go away.

Jensen coaxed Jared into releasing the death grip he had on his jacket and accepting Jensen’s calloused fingers twining with his. He proudly walked his family past the tourists that had discreetly insulted them without sparing them a single glance. But his sharp hearing didn’t miss the snide remark breathed into a beta’s ear.

“Aren’t you glad I claimed you instead of treating you like an omega like that?”

Jensen’s shoulders tensed up and the only thing that kept him from ripping that alpha’s head off was the soothing touch of Jared’s thumb against the back of his hand. Somewhat mollified, Jensen squeezed Jared’s hand in return and they headed back to his truck.

“Could you show me how these straps work?” Jared asked him, ducking his head, after Jamie was seated. It was only halfway through his demo that Jensen recognized what Jared had done. The omega didn’t need to be shown how to work the car seat, but by permitting Jensen to take over, he had allowed him to assert his control over a situation and calmed Jensen with his delicate subterfuge.

“Thanks,” Jensen murmured as he gave Jared a tender kiss.

“Me, too,” Jamie reminded him and puckered up. Jensen obliged with a grin, ending his quick kiss with a raspberry on her cheek.

“Ew,” Jamie giggled, wiping her face with the sleeve of her jacket.

With Jensen’s tension drained, the drive to their next location was a quiet, peaceful trip. Or as peaceful as AC/DC and Black Sabbath could make it. Judging by the slight grimace on his face, Jared was not as much of a fan as Jamie had become. While Bon Scott sang,
“Come right in
Forget about him
We’ll have ourselves a ball”

Jensen slid a hand over and held onto Jared’s. Except for the few times he needed to shift, he left it covering the omega’s for the hour ride. Taking less popular roads, Jensen avoided the bulk of the tourist traffic without sacrificing another beautiful drive. Autumn sunshine bathed the cab with its white light and set the leaves outside aglow.

“Is that a barn?” Jamie pointed to a red building off to the left.

“Yup,” Jensen drawled and turned in that direction.

“Rocky Ridge Orchard?” Jared read from the small sign that dangled off an old-fashioned style street lamp.

“Yup,” Jensen repeated.

“Are those pumpkins?” the little girl exclaimed breathlessly.

In front of the main building for the orchard was a ridiculously large collection of pumpkins in marching band formation. “Look at them all,” she squealed in delight, straining against the safety restraints. “There are white ones! I’ve never seen white ones!”

“And there are apple trees, too. We can pick as many apples as we like,” Jensen told her as he eased into a parking space.

“And then Mommy can make us pies,” she agreed happily, trying to undo her straps now that the truck had come to a stop.

“Exactly,” he agreed.

“Oh, I can, can I?” Jared chimed in, raising an eyebrow in surprise, gently swatting Jamie’s hands aside to tackle the latches himself.

“Well, you make the best ones,” Jamie nodded vigorously, curls bouncing with every move she made. “And I’ll help.”

As he got his daughter out of the seat, he reminded her, “Licking the spoon and the bowl isn’t really helping.”

“They need to be cleaned up, don’t they?” Jamie countered with a cunning gleam in her eye. “That’s helping.”

Jensen chuckled. “Can’t argue with that logic.”

“I guess I can’t.” Squinting at both, he added, “I’m starting to feel outnumbered around you two.”

“Don’t be silly, Mommy,” Jamie assured him as she slipped her tiny in hand in his before offering Jensen the other one. “We’re all together. We’re J3.” And it was apparently that simple for Jamie.

“She’s right, you know,” Jensen agreed as he took her hand. “That’s who we are.”

Jared turned his head slightly away, blinking rapidly. “I guess we are.” He shielded his eyes with his free hand. “Sun’s so bright,” he offered lamely. Jensen let him get away with it.
“How about we grab some lunch and then see about them apples, hmm?” the alpha offered, trying to keep Jamie from noticing her mother’s tears.

“How about we grab some lunch and then see about them apples, hmm?” the alpha offered, trying to keep Jamie from noticing her mother’s tears.

“Okie dokie,” Jamie singsonged. Jared and he swung her forward as they walked, leaving her giddy with uncontrollable laughter. Jensen honestly couldn’t think of a happier sound than her childish giggles.

“Ooh…Tote’s ice cream,” she carefully read on the large sign to the left of the store’s main door.

“Maybe for dessert,” Jared cautioned her.

Inside, a large reader board listed the harvest dates for the orchard’s apple trees. “Looks like we’re in time for the Northern Spy and Baldwin varieties,” Jensen told them. “The first is a very tasty, slightly tart apple, green with splotches of red. The second is really good for making hard cider.”

“How do you drink something that’s hard?” Jamie wondered. “Do you have to chew it?”

Smirking, Jensen elaborated, “When someone says a drink is ‘hard’, they mean it’s alcoholic.”

“Oh, grown-up stuff,” she deduced.

“Very much so,” Jared agreed. “Nothing you need to worry about for many years to come.”

“I am almost five, you know,” Jamie pointed out.

Jared groaned softly. “Don’t remind me, baby. Don’t remind me.” Jensen tried not to laugh, because Jamie had years to go before alcohol became an issue. His suppressed mirth did not go unnoticed. Jared watched him closely as he remarked, “Next thing you know, Davy will be asking you out on a date.”

That sobered Jensen up quickly. “Over my dead body,” he murmured. It was Jared’s turn to smirk.

They headed over to place their lunch order. Jared, when confronted by both Jamie and Jensen’s pleading expressions at the sight of apple cider flavored donuts, admitted defeat and agreed they should each get something different for dessert and then share. Jensen carried their tray out to the patio while Jared got them a table overlooking the golden hay fields. The table wobbled when Jensen set the heavily-laden tray down, so Jared stuffed a few, wadded-up napkins under one of the legs to steady the plastic furniture. They decided to divvy up everything, meaning the crabmeat rolls, roast beef and turkey sandwiches on homemade bread were all up for grabs. Jensen couldn’t keep the smile off his face as he leaned back to absorb the happy chatter around him while Jamie scraped the ice cream bowl clean.

Gathering up their empty plates, Jensen suggested they get their bags and start picking. “We’ll get the pumpkin last,” he suggested to Jamie, “since that will be the heaviest. And I’ll need your help picking out one for the pub, too.”

“I’ll find you the best one,” she promised him seriously.

“Nope. Find me the second best, because you and your mother deserve the best one,” he corrected her.

She dropped her head like her mother did when embarrassed. “Okay, Jensen,” she agreed quietly. “Thank you.”

With their picking bags in hand, Jensen led them to the orchard where they spent nearly an hour
filling them up. Jamie took her apple picking very seriously, Jensen discovered, scrutinizing each one carefully. Jared leaned close and whispered, “I’m sorry she’s taking so long.”

Jensen seized the opportunity of a distracted Jamie to slip his fingers around Jared’s belt, tugging him close. “Don’t apologize,” he admonished the omega gently. “On such a beautiful day, why would we want to rush anything? I love spending time with you both.” The dappled sunlight danced across Jared’s face, making his eyes amber and Jensen couldn’t resist. He released Jared’s belt and placed both his hands on the omega’s face, rough skin catching on the slightest hint of stubble along Jared’s jaw, and kissed him under the spreading branches of the apple tree.

Jared sighed and melted into it, pulling Jensen against his chest. He opened his lips to Jensen’s gentle prodding, almost humming as the alpha threaded his fingers through Jared’s insanely silky locks. Cradling the omega’s skull with one hand, Jensen dropped the other to return to the small of Jared’s back and pressed their hips together. A sudden breeze passed through the orchard, showering them in autumn’s confetti, although neither man noticed the falling leaves, too tangled up in the smells and tastes of the other. Only Jamie’s voice was strong enough to break the spell they were trapped in.

“I need a boost please,” she requested sweetly.

“Coming,” Jensen said as he reluctantly stepped away from Jared’s enticing heat to heft Jamie high above his head. He watched as she plucked a specific apple to add to her slow-growing collection.

“No one else can get as high as I can,” she proclaimed proudly as Jensen returned her to the ground. “Between you two, there’s nothing I can’t do.”

“That’s right, honey,” Jensen confirmed as he brushed a few curls out of her eyes. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

Meandering over the lumpy ground, surrounded by trees heavy with fruit, Jensen was content. The air was crisp and burned slightly, hinting at the winter to come. Jamie raced ahead, but always stayed in sight and, unlike the Botanical Gardens, the orchard was populated mostly by locals. The little girl held onto her current bag with two hands, while Jensen carried a full one, leaving him a free hand to hold onto Jared’s. The longer they wandered, the more relaxed the omega grew. His smiles came quicker and lasted longer. Most noticeably, his posture seemed to do two things seemingly at odds with one other: relax and grow straighter. Like his daughter, his cheeks were pink from the brisk air and it was a good look on him. Jensen decided that it was a near-perfect day.

“Are you really going to make hard cider with these?” Jamie asked Jensen as she peered into the full bag of smaller, Baldwin apples.

“I sure am. I brew my own beer, too,” he replied.

“Can I help?” Jamie offered.

Thinking about the large pot of boiling malt and other ingredients that brewing entailed, Jensen didn’t think it would be a safe activity. “Nothing really tasty to clean up. But,” he added when she looked disappointed, “you could help me measure out the hops and other stuff I use before I get started.”

“I can do that.”

“Why don’t we take these bags back to the truck and get our pumpkins, because I have one more surprise for you here,” Jensen told them mysteriously, taking Jamie and Jared’s bags, too.

“Another one? But that’s so many.” Jamie seemed worried, chewing on her sweetheart-pink lips.
“Nah, that just means I’ve got some credit on weekends we can’t go out.”

Looking up at him with her deep, blue eyes, Jamie said, “We don’t have to go anywhere, you know. Just being together is enough.”

“She’s right,” Jared added quietly. “It really is.”

Jensen pursed his lips and cut his eyes to the side, hoping to quash the stinging behind them. “Well,” he croaked out gruffly (and how had his throat clogged up that fast?), “it’s more than enough for me, too.”

Situating the apples in the bed of the truck so they wouldn’t roll around everywhere, Jensen trotted across the parking lot to where Jamie and Jared were inspecting the pumpkins, the former squatting down and studiously examining the ones closest to her.

“She’s kinda intense about this, huh?” he commented as the tiny omega alternately pat and hugged the gourds.

“She’s testing for roundness,” Jared explained to him, lips twitching upward.

“Obviously,” Jensen quipped and Jared knocked their shoulders together before hooking his pinky finger through Jensen’s belt loop. The alpha in him preened at the connection.

They stood side by side as Jamie dragged the little cart the orchard provided for pumpkin pickers (they had some that weighed fifty to sixty pounds) up and down the neat rows of gourds. Jensen had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep his laughter inside as she pulled out a half dozen and made a slow pass by them a second time like a canine judge at Westminster before finally choosing her final two. She put the others back in line, giving them a conciliatory stroke along their stems as she did, before lugger her prizes back to them.

“Wow,” Jensen exclaimed. “You really did find the best ones.”

Jamie let out a big sigh, dragging her arm across her forehead to get the hair out of her eyes. “It wasn’t easy. They’re all so cute. You know the coolest places, Jensen.”

Taking the cart handle from her, he pulled it over to the stand out front to pay for them. He meant to run them to the truck solo, but Jamie tagged along, explaining all the reasons she chose them and why “hers” – per her exacting standards – was slightly better than Jensen’s, but not by much.

“Well,” he said as he placed them in the truck bed, “have you decided how you’re gonna carve yours?”

Jamie simply looked at him with wide eyes.

“I mean, how you’re going to cut yours up?” he corrected himself, thinking she didn’t know what “carve” meant. Her eyes, however, only got wider.

“Cut my pumpkin?” she gasped. “Why would I hurt it?”

“Uh,” Jensen mumbled, looking back at Jared, but the omega was too far away to be any help. Floundering for something to say, he finally tried, “Because it’s tradition?”

“I’ve never had one before.”

Jensen scratched the back of his neck, buying himself some time. “Well,” he finally began, “the
whole thing started with the Irish.” He then proceeded to tell her the legend of Stingy Jack and how folks began carving turnips and potatoes to keep him away from their doorstep on All Hallows Eve. While she was interested, Jamie still didn’t want to maim her pumpkin.

“Okay, you can show me how to carve a potato,” she finally agreed. “But we’re not cutting ‘kin.”

Spotting some decorated ones on a far stand, he suggested, “We could paint…er…” ’kin like those over there.”

“Oh, like make-up,” she clapped her hands. “Mommy says I’m too pretty for that stuff, but I think he’s teasing. I could practice on ‘kin.”

Relieved that he hadn’t traumatized Jamie with visions of butchering her pumpkin (who knows what she would have made of his favorite pastime of pulling out the innards and toasting the seeds for a snack), Jensen took her hand in his as they walked back to Jared, feet crunching on the gravel. “I don’t think he was teasing. You’re pretty just the way you are.”

Jamie tucked her chin against her outside shoulder and wouldn’t look him in the eye. “Thank you,” she mumbled.

“So, about this last surprise?” Jared had his hands tucked in his jeans and was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

Jensen winked. “This way.” And he showed them around the second, red building located beside the orchard’s store. A large wagon, open on all sides and full of loose hay was waiting for them, with two draft horses calming grazing and pawing at the ground.

“Jensen,” a large man amiably called out and walked over to them.

“Santa,” Jamie whispered reverently, “and horses.”

Jensen had to admit that John Sczymecki was larger than life. He was a barrel of an alpha, taller than Jared with snow-white hair and a beard to match, who could definitely pass as Haddon Sundblom’s version of Saint Nick.

“Good to see you again, John,” Jensen shook his hand. “How are things at the farm?”

“Getting’ ready for winter. Same old, same old. And who are your friends?”

“This is Jared and his daughter Jamie. They’ve recently moved up here from Texas and Jared,” he added proudly, “is the new teacher at the Hyde School.” He didn’t miss the flush that spread from Jared’s rosy cheeks down his long throat.

“Nice to meet you, Mister…” Jared trailed off, holding out his slim hand.

“Sczymecki,” he said, shaking Jared’s hand without hesitation.

“How do you do, Mr. Sczymecki?” Jamie asked in her clear, high voice, hand held out fearlessly. Bending down, he shook her tiny hand as well. “Wow, not many can say my name correctly right off the bat.”

“Another Polski, huh? In that case, you can ride in front with me,” John said, already helping a very eager Jamie onto the padded bench at the front of the wagon. Jensen caught the subtle shift Jared
made when the larger alpha picked up his daughter.

“She’ll be fine,” Jensen whispered to him. “Trust me.”

Releasing his lower lip from where he was biting it, Jared gave a short jerk of his chin. “I do trust you.”

Standing beside the large wagon, John turned back to Jared. “Sorry about that. I’m so used to dealing with kids, I sometimes don’t think about it. I should have asked if it was okay first.”

Jared relaxed against Jensen’s side, the last of his worries dissipating. “It’s fine. I can be a little overprotective sometimes,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Totally understandable, what with you being a single parent and all. It’s your job.”

None of the men could miss the way Jamie was squirming in her seat, eager to be on the move. “I hope you know what you’re in for with her as a co-pilot,” Jared joked.

Hauling himself up onto the bench, which groaned under his formidable size, John picked up the reins to his team of draft horses. “Not my first rodeo,” he joked with a rumbling laugh. “Now you fellas better hop in back before we leave you behind.”

“Hurry, Mommy,” Jamie urged him impatiently.

Jared stretched out his long, long legs, apparently enjoying the space. While Jamie peppered John with all kinds of questions (“What kind of horses are they? How much do they eat? Do you ever put a saddle on them and ride them that way?”) that he kindly and thoroughly answered without a hint of exasperation, Jensen slipped his arm contentedly around Jared’s shoulder. The omega nestled against him immediately. With John and Jamie’s conversation a pleasant, background noise, the two men talked about everything and nothing as they took a slow, lazy tour around the century old orchard. The sunlight winked at them from between the abundant branches of apple and maple trees and the gentle rocking of the wagon was almost hypnotic the way a boat was on calm waters.

“Your eyes are greener than any leaf I’ve ever seen,” Jared murmured at one point.

“And I still haven’t figured out what color yours are,” he replied, one hand caressing Jared’s cheek. “I think I’m gonna have to study them for a very long time to figure that out. Is that all right with you?”

“Take all the time you need,” Jared breathed as Jensen leaned closer, pressing a kiss to the corner of his mouth. Jared’s lips were chapped from the cold and the nervous licking he indulged in, but were perfect as far as Jensen was concerned.

“I could get used to this,” Jensen confessed as they settled deeper into the hay.

“Me, too.” Jared rested his hand against Jensen’s heart. They passed by large piles of burning leaves, the applewood smoke tangy in the air. Jared breathed deep and then shivered. Jensen hugged him closer.

“Cold, sweetheart? Want my vest?” he offered. Jared might be longer in the torso, but Jensen was broader in the shoulders, so he figured it would fit.
Shaking his head until his bangs fell into his eyes, Jared whispered, “It’s not the cold; it’s the air. This is what you smell like and it’s all around me, like I’m wrapped up in you, breathing you in with every breath I take.”

Swallowing hard, Jensen rasped, “Is that a good thing?”

Tilting his head up until Jensen saw his exotic eyes, open and trusting, “It’s a very good thing.” And in a bold move, Jared hooked a leg around Jensen’s and rubbed against it. “If we were alone, it would be an even better thing.” There was heat in Jared’s eyes that Jensen was certain was mirrored in his own.

“Soon,” Jensen exhaled in Jared’s ear, making the omega shiver again. He nipped along the cold, tender lobe before pressing a kiss there. “Soon.”

They spent the remainder of the ride tangled up in each other like the wagon was their personal nest. Occasionally, Jared would twist around and make sure Jamie was all right. John was obviously very good with children, patient and kind with each one of her questions, and Jared was able to completely relax in the moment. They exchanged lazy kisses and then suppressed chuckles when the wagon would hit a rut and jounce them around. The ride was a crazy mix of sensual pleasure and outright mirth that left them both breathless.

When they were back where they started from, John helped Jamie down and carried her over to the pair of Suffolk horses so she could pet them safely out of range of their massive legs and hooves. Jensen leapt down and held his hands up to offer Jared help. They both knew he didn’t really need it, but took advantage of the situation nevertheless. Jensen circled his strong hands around Jared’s trim waist, effortlessly lifting him out of the wagon and sliding him down the hard length of his body to the ground in a small cloud of golden chaff.

“Thanks,” he breathed out, not shying away from the press of Jensen’s groin against his.

“My very real pleasure,” Jensen winked, reluctantly letting go only to snatch up Jared’s hand as they went to collect Jamie.

“You’re are most certainly welcome, Miss P,” he retorted.

Jamie ran into her mother’s legs, wrapping her arms about his thighs and leaning her head back, already filling the air with her breathless chatter about the horses and everything she’d learned during the ride.

“Thanks again, John,” Jensen said, extending his hand.

“My pleasure,” he grinned and then plucked a straw of hay from Jensen’s collar. “Or, maybe, it was your pleasure.”

Jensen was sure the tips of his ears were beet red, given the way they burned. John eyed the pair of omegas knowingly. “You’ve got the makings of a wonderful family there, Jensen.”

Turning, Jensen watched as Jared lifted Jamie up and settled her on one hip to safely stand close to the horses while she talked and waved her small hands around. Jared’s dimples were visible even from where the two alphas were standing.

“Yeah, they’re pretty great. I’m a lucky guy.”
John clapped him on his shoulder and Jensen stumbled a little from the force of it. “Let me know if you’ll be wanting a winter repeat of today.”

Jensen, already envisioning them bundled up in John’s sleigh with snow blanketing the surrounding woods, nodded absently. “Count on it.”

The ride home wasn’t long, but the fresh air and excitement had wiped Jamie out. She was asleep before Jared had her fastened in her car seat. Jensen switched to a soft rock station and held Jared’s hand. Neither one felt the need to say a word.

Back at Jared’s house, Jensen unloaded the produce while Jared unloaded Jamie. She perked up enough to give Jensen a big hug and sloppy kiss.

“Today was the best, Jensen. Thank you so much.”

“Anytime, honey,” he hugged her back and kissed her hair.

Setting her down and telling her to go upstairs to wash up, Jared asked him, “You want to come in?” And Jensen really, really did. But a part of him still thought it was too soon. “Maybe another time.” Jared’s disappointment wasn’t hidden. Jensen pulled him into a hug. “Today was for you two,” he explained softly. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to pay me back, okay?” Jared lowered his head to Jensen’s shoulder and the alpha wondered, given Jared’s height, how that could be comfortable. “‘Kay,” he reluctantly agreed. “But one of these days, you’re going to have to accept that I’m offering because I want to, not because I feel I have to.” And he nuzzled along Jensen’s throat, sweet and willing.

While Jensen’s mind hadn’t gotten with the program, his alpha was already on board, cock fighting against his strangling jeans. He nearly crushed Jared to his chest, tempering himself at the last moment. It took a monumental effort to pull his head far enough back to escape Jared’s erotic touch. Panting, Jensen swallowed hard and snagged a hand in Jared’s hair, pulling his head back enough that Jensen could return the favor. He dragged his stubbled cheek up the length of the omega’s neck, catching on the smoother skin, licking and tasting as he went. The heady, rich scent was almost too much and Jensen was flooded with the need to take and claim. He growled into Jared’s ear, “Never doubt that I want you.” Jared shivered against him, wrapping his arms tighter around Jensen’s waist and digging into muscle with the pads of his fingers, not hiding the growing tightness in his jeans, either.

Mouthing along the shell of Jared’s ear, Jensen struggled with himself, the demands of his alpha insistent. Finally pulling away, he gave Jared a gentle shake to make the omega meet his eyes. It was nearly dark and the yellow glow from the living room lamp was slowly turning Jared into a silhouette as they lingered by the front door. Licking his lips, Jensen admitted, “I—I want you so much that it overwhelms me, okay? I just need some time to…” and he didn’t even know how to begin to finish that statement. But, apparently, Jared did.

Giving Jensen a final press of his slender hands, the omega took a reluctant step back, letting the cool, evening air slip between their bodies. “I understand,” he smiled, shaking the bangs out of his eyes. Jensen couldn’t resist, and tucked a few strands behind his ear for him. “I really do,” he reassured Jensen. “Take all the time you need to figure out what you need, okay?”

Jensen stepped back as well, still uncertain and off-balance. “I—” he started, but Jared brushed his slim fingers against Jensen’s full mouth, quieting him with the touch.
“Thank you,” the omega spoke calmly, “for a wonderful day.”

Jensen’s smile was rueful, but sincere. “It really was perfect and then I had to go ahead and ruin it, huh?”

“You didn’t ruin a thing,” Jared corrected him. “Not a single thing.”

“Call you tomorrow?” Jensen asked, still afraid he had somehow spoiled things between them.

“I’m counting on it,” Jared replied with a grin.

Jensen rushed forward to steal a final kiss before he reluctantly stumbled down the porch steps and made his way back to his truck. As he latched the gate shut, Jared, now only a dark shape in the doorway, raised his hand to Jensen. The alpha returned the gesture and, as was his habit, waited where he was until Jared closed and secured the door behind him. Nothing serious ever really happened in Winnegance, but Jensen felt better knowing Jared had locked up the house behind him.

He climbed into his truck, letting it run a little while to warm up. Glancing at the empty car seat, a pang of wrongness cut through him. Gripping the steering wheel tight enough that his knuckle bones threatened to split through his skin, Jensen fought with his alpha desires. His whole life, he’d grappled with urges that ran through his body and those struggles had shaped his life. All the control he’d fought for was crumbling beneath him and he resented and dreaded that loss. He slammed the truck into gear and drove off into the gathering gloom.

Jared was busy the following week with grading exams and getting his and Jamie’s costumes ready for Halloween, limiting the time Jensen got to spend with them after their orchard trip. In a way, Jensen was grateful. The short break gave him time to try and figure out what the hell was wrong with him. Of course, it didn’t help that the few times he did get to see Jared (but wasn’t allowed into Jamie’s room where their “super-secret project” was), Jensen smelled Amell all over his omega. All right, “all over” was an exaggeration, but it might as well have been the same thing with the way his alpha gnashed his teeth at Jensen and demanded that he put things to right.

At wit’s end, with no one else to turn to, Jensen eventually confessed his confusion to Kim when they were going over the pub’s books. He had barely finished explaining himself to her when the alpha reached across his coffee table and slapped him upside his head.

“You dummy,” she chided him with a hint of a smile.

“What the hell, Kim?” he groused, rubbing his head absently.

“You’re feeling that way because Jared is ‘the one’,” she snickered, hooking her fingers at the last part.

“So help me, if you make air quotes one more time, I’m gonna hit back,” he threatened her with nothing but hot air to back it up.

“Jensen,” she began, shifting to sit on the couch next to him, “haven’t you ever been in love?”

He opened and closed his mouth several times. “I thought I was,” he finally settled on, “but lately I’m not sure what it is I feel. There’s this itch deep in the marrow of my bones that’s just growing stronger the more I’m around Jared.”

“What you’re describing to me is exactly how I felt after I met Bri. She had me twisted up in knots from the get go. I didn’t know if I was coming or going, not to mention how much I wanted to,” and here she paused to take a deep breath, “own her, as wrong as that sounds. But I can’t describe it any
other way.”

“Did she feel the same?” Jensen hoped the question wasn’t out of line, but he was kind of desperate.

“Sort of. But I got real lucky, because she’s more willing to bend in our relationship than I am.” She downed the rest of her beer, blotting her mouth with her shirt sleeve after.

Jensen held up his hand. “No need to overshare,” he jokingly warned her.

“Ass,” she chuckled and slapped him again for good measure. “Like I’d share the details of the best sex ever with a junior officer.”

“Who are you calling ‘junior’, woman?” Jensen mock glared, walking into the kitchen to return with two, fresh beers.

“Seriously,” Kim continued after accepting the new bottle and the implicit invitation to keep talking, “the struggle you’re talking about is exactly what clued me in to my real status. I knew there was no way a beta could feel like this. Like,” and she squeezed her hands into fists before consciously relaxing them again, “there was an animal just below the surface clawing to break free all the time.”

Jensen nodded wordlessly, because that was exactly it.

“Fuckin’ knotheads who sneer at omegas and claim they’re the animals because they go into heat twice a year are lying to themselves. We’re the ones barely under control any given minute and we’ve projected that self-loathing for centuries onto a class of people that never deserved it.” When she noticed Jensen’s amazed look, she added, “You think you’re the only one who ever fought with his inner-alpha?”

“It’s not like many talk about it,” he mumbled into his Samuel Adams. “Wasn’t exactly covered in Gender Development classes back in middle school.”

Kim pursed her lips and agreed. “True enough. But I did enough soul-searching to get where I am today that I’m not going to lie to myself or anyone else, for that matter. I call ‘em as I see ‘em.” And that was one of the traits Jensen had admired most about Kim when they served together and what, he believed, had stood her in good stead as a leader.

Scratching at the corner of the label on the amber bottle with his thumbnail, Jensen asked, “So Jared’s making me crazy because he’s the one?”

“Guh,” Kim let out with an exasperated sigh, letting her head fall back against the couch. “Jared isn’t ‘making you’ anything, dumbass. He’s calling to the real you. And your alpha’s tryin’ to answer back. You’re makin’ yourself crazy by fighting it.”

“Huh,” Jensen huffed.

She leaned into him, lowering her voice almost to the level of a conspiratorial whisper. “You know what the best thing is about finding the right one? They can take everything you have to give. Just like you can handle anything they throw your way.”

Jensen sucked in a sharp breath, because that was too much to hope for. He’d never fully abandoned his control whenever he had been with a lover, no matter how long or short the duration of the relationship. He’d been labeled “shy” and “reserved” for it. The closest he’d come was with Danneel back in Texas, but even though he’d knotted the fiery red-head and been shaken to the core by the intimacy of the act, a part of him had recognized that his best friend hadn’t been the one his alpha yearned for. And he hadn’t been what she really needed, either. Dragging his hand roughly over his
Jensen took another swig of his beer.

“This is…”

“A revelation?” Kim finished for him. “Whelp,” slapping her hands on her thighs, Kim stood up. “I’m going to let you chew on that for the rest of the night.” Walking around to the back of the couch, she leaned over to wrap her arms around his upper torso and rest her chin on his shoulder. Jensen startled. It was the most physically affectionate she had ever been with him in the history of their friendship. “And here’s another newsflash for ya,” she admitted. “It’s okay to be afraid.”

Fear. That wasn’t something an officer, let alone an alpha, ever admitted to.

“There’s no denying Jared’s had a shit time of things in his life and you’re trying to do right by him, because you’re a decent alpha. But you need more and you’re afraid to want more at the same time, aren’t you?” She kissed him on his cheek. “Welcome to being in love.”

He sat there for a long time after she left, eventually rousing himself enough to dump their empties in the recycling. He showered in a perfunctory manner and climbed into bed naked, pulling the covers up to his waist. Despite the cooler nights, he ran hot, like most alphas did. Lacing his fingers behind his head, he stared at the ceiling as though answers might seep through like water stains. None did. He restlessly rolled over onto his side and breathed deep, but after a few changes of sheets, the bed had long since lost the scent of his family.

His family.

That really said it all. Time to face his fears and, maybe, his future. He burrowed his face into the pillow and drifted off to sleep.
Despite his best intentions, the pub kept Jensen busy and away from Jared. With the election nearing, more people had been coming in during the evenings, needing a place to blow off steam when home life had become too volatile, too toxic to hold civil discussion. Occasionally, tempers flared, bottles were broken and on several occasions, Jensen had worried he’d end up with a full-on brawl on his hands. But a threatening glare coupled with flexing his sizeable arms had been enough to dissuade most hotheads. Since moving here, he couldn’t recall anything that had the town as riled up as this presidential race. And that was why he found himself coming in early on Halloween with several grocery bags overflowing with candy.

Like the other businesses on the main drag had done, Kim and he decided to add The Pitch & Roll to the list of establishments the town’s underage Trick-or-treaters could visit, since Halloween fell on a weekend and everyone was open. He dumped the candy into a half whiskey barrel beside the bar that doubled as a planter outside the front door in the summertime, usually filled with colorful annuals. Kim, hair dyed completely white and wearing a slinky, black jumpsuit, was hanging chains and fake seaweed around the bar, opting for a Davy Jones’ Locker look for the place. She’d even gotten some nearly life-size skeletons at a Michaels near Portland and dressed them up as pirates. They were posed menacingly around the place, one sitting on the end of the bar with legs crossed and sword arm raised high.

“What are you supposed to be again?” Jensen mumbled around a Sugar Daddy he had stolen out of the barrel.

She turned around and huffed out, “I’m the Mangaverse version of the Black Cat.”

Sucking on the caramel, Jensen grinned. “Did Briana dress up as Peter Parker?”

“No, as Spider-Woman, because that’s who Marv Wolfman initially wanted her to be a foil for.” She wore a “Don’t you know anything?” expression on her face as she explained Felicia Hardy’s original inception. By the time she wrapped up, she gave him a critical once-over. “And what are you going as?”

Pulling the candy out his mouth with a lewd pop, he smacked his sticky lips. “Uh, a grumpy bastard?”

She pursed her lips and nodded. “It works for you.” And then she went back to her decorating.

Jensen was mildly curious why she had hung around past their shift change, but there were enough kiddies coming in that he was too busy to really comment on it. He figured she was just enjoying the relatively stress-free occasion where the majority of their customers were happy for a change and not grumbling about politics. He was in the middle of properly pouring a Guinness for Doc Beaver and didn’t initially notice the pair of very yellow Trick-or-treaters who came in with the latest horde of children. He was wiping down the bar when they came over, the taller one clearing his throat. Jensen
glanced up, ready smile on his face as he said, “The candy is in the barrel at the other end.” And then he got a good look at the duo.

“Hi, Jensen,” Jamie squeaked, holding up her treat bag. It was a brown grocery bag from Shaws that she had drawn a jack ‘o lantern face on. She was wearing an oversized, adult sweater in banana yellow that hung past her knees. Her stockings were yellow as well and, as he bent over the bar, Jensen recognized she had on her yellow rubbers. A black knit scarf was wrapped several times around her neck and despite the natural blush from the chilly air, she had two circles of pink painted on the apples of her cheeks. Her earmuffs had triangular, yellow felt ears tipped in black attached to them somehow.

“I’m Pichu,” she informed him.

“Gesundheit,” he replied.

“Huh?” she wrinkled her forehead, looking at him in much the same way Kim had a few minutes ago.

Waving his hand dismissively, Jensen replied, “Lame joke. And who might you be, little boy?”

Jamie giggled. “That’s Mommy, silly. He’s Pikachu.”

“Looks more like a jaundiced Easter Bunny to me,” he chuckled under his breath.

Jared had on an oversized, neon-yellow hoodie that, on closer inspection, was on backwards. He’d attached ears to the hood, but they were more elongated than Jamie’s and did kind of resemble rabbit ears with much less black on them. And while Jamie’s tail was black, Jared’s was a sad lightning bolt in marigold dangling from the back of the sweatshirt. He’d painted rosy cheeks on his face as well, a match to his daughter.

“Do you like us?” Jamie asked, twirling in place.

Leaning on his forearms across the bar, Jensen answered, “Honey, I love you.” He flicked his eyes over to Jared and winked. Jared flushed deeper red than his artificial blush.

“Well, duh,” Jamie groaned. “But do you like our costumes?”

And Jensen was momentarily caught off-guard by Jamie’s frank assessment. It seemed everyone else already knew what Jensen was only coming to terms with. “They’re very…yellow,” he finally finished diplomatically.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “Well, double-duh. We’re Pokémon, Jensen.”

“You better watch out someone doesn’t catch you,” Jensen warned her seriously. “Two Pokémon like you are probably very valuable.”

Jamie bobbed her head, felt ears flopping back and forth as she did. “I know. We have to keep going, but I wanted to wish you a happy Halloween since you have to work. I’ll try to save you some candy.”

“You’re the best, Pichu,” he smirked. When Jamie turned back to her mother, Jensen held up his fist to the side of his face, thumb and pinkie extended in the universal “call me” gesture and Jared nodded.

“C’mon, Pichu,” Jared corralled his daughter. “Let’s pick a piece of candy and head down to
Jensen watched Jamie carefully choose a single sweet from their ample supply. His shoulders dipped slightly when they exited the pub.

“Get outta here,” Kim hissed in his ear, trying to snatch the towel from his hand. He hadn’t even realized she’d stepped behind the bar.

“Huh?”

“It’s your first friggin’ Halloween with your family, so you better get going before you miss anything else, dumbass.”

“I’m gonna start to get a complex if you keep calling me names, boss.” But he easily relinquished the rag, mind already turning over what half-ass costume he could throw together. He supposed his boots and Stetson would work. Swinging open the bar flap, Jensen glanced back at Kim. “Are you sure?”

The other alpha rolled her eyes upward and shook her head. “Why do you think I hung around? Bri’s going to stop by later once her shift’s over and keep me company here. In costume, I might add,” and she waggled her eyebrows. “Now get going before you lose ‘em.”

Jensen grabbed his coat from behind the counter and, with Kim’s words ringing in his ears, had a flash of inspiration. He pulled out his iPhone and held it up for her to see. “Gonna catch me a pair of Pokémon,” he announced smugly.

Kim gave him a thumbs up. “Slightly more creative than ‘grumpy bastard’.”

Jensen hurried out the door and turned down the street in the direction of Spill The Beans. He held his phone straight out and pretended not to pay attention to anything but the screen, in a close approximation of all the tourists he and Kim had mocked over the summer. He caught up with his family as they were leaving Misha’s place. Misha, covered in glitter and with a spiral horn sprouting out of the middle of their forehead, held the door open for the Pokémon pair and spotted Jensen first. The beta caught on to Jensen’s “costume” immediately and pointed to him, warning the omegas, “You guys better take off! There’s a trainer right over there!”

Jared turned, half-worried by Misha’s outburst (if his perplexed face was anything to go by), until he saw it was Jensen. Then his smile was wide enough that his dimples fought their way through the horrible rouge smeared on his cheeks.

“Pichu, Misha’s right,” he gasped. He turned Jamie around by her shoulders and aimed her in Jensen’s direction.

“We have to run, Pikachu!” she exclaimed, clasping Jared’s hand tight. Jensen pretended to stumble into a blue mail collection box and the Pokémon’s giggles echoed down the street.

For the next half hour, that’s how it went. Jamie and Jared ducked into storefronts, collected candy and then carefully peeked outside to see how close Jensen was to catching them. They dashed around, occasionally stopping to watch as Jensen would “lose” sight of them and fall into a bush or bump into someone (coincidentally, he only seemed to run into people he was friends with), Jamie’s bag getting fatter all the time. When they said goodbye to Jeff Morgan at his garage, Jared commented loudly enough for Jensen to hear him, “We’re going to have to make a break for it, Pichu, and run home! The trainer’s right behind us!”

He bent down and scooped Jamie up onto his hip, holding onto her tight. They were about a mile
from Jared’s house, so Jensen ducked behind Morgan’s and cut through more than one Winnegance resident’s backyard – Ferris Bueller style – to get there first. He nearly took himself out on Mrs. Smith’s croquet wickets, missing the piano teacher’s metal hoops under the bruise-blue sky. A few colorful expletives and a hop over the fence later, Jensen was catching his breath on Jared’s porch. He half-hid by the corner, staying upwind and scanning for his Pokémons. Jared came huffing down the street after a few minutes, tossing looks over his shoulder every once in a while.

“I don’t see him, Mommy.” Jamie was twisted around to stare over Jared’s shoulder.

“I guess we must have lost him.” And there was genuine bewilderment in Jared’s voice. He set Jamie down by the gate and unlatched it for her, still turning back to try and spot him. Jensen had to hold a hand over his mouth to keep from giving himself away. When Jared and Jamie were by the front door, he burst out of the shadows, making Jamie squeal in surprised delight.

“I’ve got you,” he roared playfully and pulled both omegas into his arms. “I caught you fair and square,” he announced as he hugged them close. “You’re mine now.”

“How did you do that?” Jamie gasped, fumbling with her candy in one arm and slinging the other around Jensen’s neck. “You’re tricky.”

Accepting all her weight as Jared shifted her into his arms to unlock the door, he leaned close and said, “Tricks are what Halloween’s all about.” He followed Jared in, carrying Jamie into the living room and plopping her on the couch while Jared flicked on the lights and turned up the thermostat. It was noticeably cooler in the house and Jensen knew Jared tried to save on oil whenever he could. He wrapped Jamie up in his coat while he helped pull off her galoshes. She was already sifting through her impressive candy collection by the time he got back from depositing their shoes by the front door. Most of it was spilled across the coffee table, where ‘kin held a place of honor in the center, decked out not only with extravagant makeup including long, glamorous eyelashes glued haphazardly above oversized eyes, but even a scarf at the base and a ribbon taped to the side of its “head”.

“I’m going to pick out some for you, Jensen, but you have to watch it very carefully. Mommy can be tricky, too, when it comes to candy.” Jamie organized her loot into three piles as she kneeled beside the table. “Have to share with him a little,” she explained to Jensen as he eyed the third pile. When Jared eventually returned, face scrubbed clean and sans tail, Jamie and he were busy sucking on Sugar Daddies and sharing secrets while they sat on the floor together. Jamie’s earmuffs dangled crookedly around her throat, making her look a little like those people at the airports who walked around with pillows attached to their necks.

Jared plucked them free and set them to the side on the table. He sat on the couch, stretching his long legs out, and rested his feet on the table.

“Mommy, get your stinky feet away from my Hershey bars,” Jamie griped.

“My feet do not stink,” Jared argued, flexing his wool-covered toes over some of her candy menacingly.

“They do so,” she countered, fanning her hand under her upturned nose.

“What are you going to do about it if I don’t move them?” he challenged her, one corner of his mouth pulled upward.

Jamie hooked her fingers into claws and made a grab for the closest one. “Then I’ll tickle ‘em,” she exclaimed around a mouthful of caramel.
Jared yanked his feet back, bending his leg and hiding one foot under the opposite thigh. Jensen raised an eyebrow and tucked that bit of knowledge away for later testing. “All right, you win,” he grumbled. Eyeing her candy, Jared rubbed his hands together. “You did pretty good tonight.”

Scrutinizing her mother, Jamie cautiously replied, “I did okay.”

“What’s with the three piles?” he asked hopefully.

“Jamie’s just organizing by type,” Jensen threw in. “See? Hard candies here,” he pointed to one stack, “chewy ones here and chocolate based ones over there.” Jared’s face fell and he was practically pouting by the end of Jensen’s short explanation.

Jamie and he exchanged one look and they both fell onto their sides, laughing and pointing at Jared. Jensen tugged Jamie close and murmured quickly in her ear.

“Mommy,” she began, pushing herself up off the floor and pulling out the sad remains of her Sugar Daddy by its white stick, “you’re such a sucker. Get it? Sucker.” And she fell back against Jensen in a new round of giggles. “That was a good one, Jensen,” she whispered loudly to him.

When they managed to get themselves under control, Jensen hauled them both upright. They sat together, leaning into each other, and picked out another piece of candy to eat. Jensen shot Jared a cockeyed grin that melted into a perplexed expression when he noticed the way Jared was smirking at him. “What?” he finally caved in and asked.

Sucking in his cheeks, Jared easily replied, “Oh, nothing. Just couldn’t help but notice even an alpha can be pretty in pink.”

Jerking back his head, Jensen looked down at himself, not seeing any pink on him.

“Jensen, you do look pretty. It makes your spots stand out. You should wear blush all the time,” Jamie decreed.

Scrubbing a hand against his cheek, it came away covered in Jamie’s makeup. Their rolling around on the floor had transferred a good portion from her face to his. The more he wiped at himself, the more Jared laughed, collapsing back on the couch and clapping his hands together. “You’re really good at blending it in,” he croaked, eyes watering in mirth. “Looks more natural that way.”

“Mommy’s right,” Jamie commented as she climbed into his lap. “You’re very good at that. Have you worn makeup before?”

“Uh, no,” he sputtered. “Remember? I said people look nicer without all the goop.”

“That’s right,” she snapped her fingers. Shifting around, she told her mother, “He did say that.”

“Well, on that note,” Jared rose to his feet, “how about we get rid of yours so I can see all of your pretty cheeks, baby?”

Jamie tried to protest, but couldn’t get a word out around the loud yawn that slipped free. Reluctantly, she stood up, patting Jensen on the cheek when she was eye to eye with him. “Thank you for coming with us tonight, Jensen.”

Sitting up straighter, he hugged her close. “Thanks for wanting me to.”

“This pile is yours,” she pointed to the collection of caramel candy. “And this one’s yours, Mommy,” she indicated the chocolate. “But only this one.” She wiggled a single finger in her mother’s
direction.

“Thank you,” both men replied.

“Should I come say goodnight after you get washed up?” Jensen wondered.

“Nuh uh,” Jamie answered and Jensen quirked a curious eyebrow. Jamie had never refused him tucking her in before.

She cupped her hands around his ear and quietly warned him, “You have to guard your candy. You can’t trust Mommy.” Stepping back, she added loudly, “Next time!”

Jensen circled his thumb and forefinger at her as Jared followed her upstairs. Feeling a shiver trip up and down his spine, he turned around and regarded the fireplace. Spotting a couple of Shaws’ paper bags tucked beside the bundle of firewood he’d brought the other day, he crumpled them up and placed kindling on top. Knowing that the flue had been professionally cleaned, he didn’t hesitate to get a fire going. By the time Jared came back down the stairs, baby monitor in hand, the fire was crackling away and warming the room better than the old oil heater could. They’d need to seriously consider replacing the antiquated monstrosity with something more efficient come springtime. Jensen stopped and shook his head, amazed at how naturally plans for their future came to him when he didn’t overthink it.

Glancing at Jensen’s handiwork, Jared didn’t hesitate to turn off the lamp beside the couch. The fire covered the room in ruddy orange, shadows stretching out mysteriously, creating the perfect atmosphere for the holiday. “Nice,” Jared said softly, grabbing a couple of pillows from the couch and joining Jensen on the floor. He propped the monitor on the table, adjusting the volume.

“She all tucked in?” Jensen replied in as quiet a voice as Jared.

“Out like a light.” He laughed. “Actually, more like in a sugar coma. I don’t think anything will wake her up tonight.”

Jensen hummed vaguely, snatching one of the throw pillows and tucking it behind his head so he could face the fire comfortably. He expected Jared to lie down with him on the rug, but the omega sat cross-legged by the table. Hearing the crinkling of cellophane wrapper, he awkwardly twisted his head to see what Jared was up to.

“Seriously?” he moaned when Jared popped a Milk Dud from Jensen’s pile into his mouth. “You are a candy fiend.” Catching Jared’s slender hand, Jensen yanked him hard enough that Jared tumbled down partway onto his chest and had to throw his hands out on either side of Jensen’s head to keep from crashing their faces together. The rest of the candy spilled around them, forgotten. Jensen hooked an arm around Jared’s waist and rolled him over his body so that the omega settled on Jensen’s left side. He kept his arm curled possessively around his slim shoulders. With his right hand, he grabbed the other pillow and flopped it behind his head, snuggling against the alpha. They both stared into the flames, while Jensen absently stroked his left hand up and down the round of Jared’s shoulder.

For a while, neither of them said anything. The fire popped and hissed as pockets of sap burned away, filling the comfortable silence between them with the soothing sound. Eventually, Jared began to squirm and apologetically shuffled into a sitting position. “Between you and the fire, I’m overheating.”

Jensen rolled onto his side, propping his head up on his hand. “I get you that hot, huh?”
His unfortunate choice of words sank in and Jared flushed adorably. He kept silent as he struggled out of his hideously yellow sweatshirt, t-shirt lifting in the process and exposing a strip of belly flesh to Jensen’s steady gaze. He reached across with his free hand, trailing a finger above the edge of Jared’s jeans. The omega, still tangled up in the sweatshirt, couldn’t do anything to stop him. Jensen was enthralled by the way Jared’s abs twitched and tightened at the barely-there touch on his flesh. When Jared did manage to free himself, his hair was a static-charged halo, floating around his head. The air between them was no less electric. Jensen stopped his stroking to smile up at Jared, whose face was redder than before. But the omega returned his expression, albeit in a slightly nervous and bashful manner.

Taking a deep breath through his nose to ground himself, Jensen let his gaze drop to the twisted shirt in Jared’s hands. “The Cabby Shack?” he asked, spotting the familiar logo of the Massachusetts restaurant emblazoned across the back of the now right-side-out hoodie.

“Huh?” Jared murmured, tilting his head in befuddled confusion, sweating slightly.

Without conscious thought, Jensen started rubbing along Jared’s waist with his thumb again, palm fitting perfectly against his skin. “Your costume, Pikachu.”

Jared’s lips parted and there was blink-and-miss-it flick of his tongue along the bottom one, moistening the tender flesh invitingly. “Oh, this,” he finally realized, rolling the balled-up piece of clothing between his elegant hands. Chuckling in a deprecating way, he explained, “I picked it and Jamie’s sweater up at Cohen’s Consignments. It was the cheapest way to go Pokémon.”

Jensen momentarily flashed to the owner’s face. Matt Cohen, an attractive beta, was one of the residents that he had almost dated before deciding it would have been a mistake to risk ruining where he lived and worked for simply a quick tumble. As he focused back on Jared’s elven face, the angles and lines sharply prominent in the firelight, he couldn’t imagine how he had ever been able to contemplate being with anyone else. He reluctantly removed his hand from Jared’s waist and plucked the sweatshirt from his nervous fingers. He tossed it aside, not caring where it landed, and urged Jared to lie back down. In the process, Jared’s t-shirt rucked up farther, exposing more delicious skin for him to admire, including a portion of one, dusky nipple. Jensen couldn’t resist and leaned over to press his lips against the tantalizing nub, tasting salty-sweet skin as his tongue teased relentlessly against the exposed areola.

Jared arched his back like he had touched him with a live wire. Jensen pulled back only long enough to redjust his position, leaving him hovering above Jared’s body, legs and arms caging the lithe omega beneath him. “Can I?” he asked plaintively, eyes flicking back and forth, trying to catch and hold Jared’s dark gaze. Jensen brushed some of his hair aside to see him better. “Can I?” he repeated hotly.

Jared rolled his lips into his mouth, but jerked his head up and down, causing wisps of his chestnut hair to fall back into his eyes again. Jensen didn’t waste a second once he had permission. He lowered himself down, settling between Jared’s legs, which had spread instinctively to accommodate him. Jensen shoved Jared’s shirt higher until it was under his chin, exposing his entire chest. He returned his full, hungry lips to the nipple he had already begun to torment, sucking and biting the vulnerable flesh. The little nub tightened and hardened under his relentless attention. And he played with the other one, rolling and twisting it with his thumb and middle finger at the same time. Between the nips and soothing licks, Jared moaned softly, tossing his head side to side, hands running madly up and down Jensen’s back. The alpha lifted off enough to get to his knees, straddling the omega’s hips, and finally freed Jared from the strangling shirt with a crackle of static. The firelight made his skin glow honey-warm and Jensen was suddenly too hot, too, exposed under the omega’s heated scrutiny. While Jared sucked on his lower lip and stared with eyes gone black with
want, Jensen methodically undid his shirt, baring his muscled torso to Jared in a slow reveal. His single dog tag glinted against his chest in the winking light. He carefully pulled it up over his head and let it land with a clink on the hardwood floor beside him.

“‘Yes,’” Jared hissed when Jensen lowered himself back down, rubbing his naked chest over Jared like he was marking his territory, marking Jared as his. The omega twinned his arms about Jensen’s neck, as the alpha dipped his nose behind Jared’s ear, and urged him closer. Like Jensen was his moon, that secret, midnight flower-scent that was Jared’s alone blossomed and threatened to overwhelm the alpha. Licking along the outer curve of Jared’s ear, he bumped and rubbed his groin against Jared’s, all but growling in delight when the omega’s hips stuttered in an instinctual answer.

Tonguing the long, beautiful arch of Jared’s throat, Jensen shimmied farther down his body, as restless as the omega was. He lifted his head to watch Jared’s unguarded expression as he plucked and tugged on his tight, peaked nipples. The younger man writhed under him, pulling and pushing against Jensen’s shoulders like he was losing his mind, like he was coming undone. Chuckling darkly, Jensen continued to lick a trail from his sternum to the defined creases between Jared’s abs before plunging his tongue into the well of the omega’s navel again and again. The way Jared’s body thrust up at the action had Jensen desperately scrabbling a hand to clutch the base his cock to keep his knot from inflating. He was suddenly grateful that his jeans were holding him in check, not wanting to miss a minute of Jared’s pleasure even if it was at the cost of his own.

Mouthing lower, Jensen caught the wispy hair that trailed below Jared’s belly towards his cock and tugged playfully on it with his teeth. “Jensen,” Jared rasped, breathless like he’d been running for miles, raising a heavy head to stare at him in surprise.

Keeping his eyes fixed on Jared, Jensen kissed his way down to the top button of Jared’s jeans. Half-kneeling again, Jensen rested his hands against Jared’s fly, a beggar before the omega. “Can I see you, Jared? All of you?”

Rosy with desire and embarrassment (Jensen couldn’t mistake that scent in such close quarters), Jared shifted his hands from Jensen’s shoulders to cross his chest like he was trying to hide. Although it was painfully difficult to stop, Jensen moved a hand to cup Jared’s cheek, pleased when the omega nuzzled into it. “You can tell me ‘no’, Jared. You can always tell me ‘no’ and I’ll honor it. I’ll honor you,” he finished forcefully.

Jared’s breathing immediately calmed at the words and his face melted into soft affection. He let his arms fall aside, weak before Jensen’s declaration, and nodded once. Jensen couldn’t resist brushing against the mole by his nose with a finger before he shifted his hands back down to Jared’s jeans. Staring fixedly at his face, Jensen started to thumb open the fly, taking an excruciatingly long time from one button to the next, the sound of his fingertips brushing against the material like the snapping fire. Jensen gauged Jared’s expression with each pop, determined to stop if it looked like the omega was the slightest bit upset. While Jared was unsettled, however, Jensen didn’t sense any distress. With the last button undone, he shifted so that he could tug the jeans free. Deciding not to torture Jared or himself longer than necessary, Jensen made sure to hook Jared’s boxers as well so that everything came off in one, sure pull.

Sitting back on his heels, Jensen took a moment and just stared at the lithe body bared before him. Jared clutched at the rug beneath him like he was forcing himself to let Jensen look his fill. And Jensen didn’t waste the opportunity, marveling at the toned muscles and lean strength on display just for him. Jared was still uncertain, but his long, pretty cock – nestled in a patch of downy, dark hair – was flushed and bouncing against his flat stomach, proving he was aroused as well. As he twitched and shivered, his muscles shifted and flexed beneath a flawless canvas of skin, untouched except for a few moles that dotted his body. Jensen was especially taken with Jared’s long legs, from the strong
thighs to the way his rounded calves tapered down to almost delicate ankles and toes. He was dying to run both hands and tongue along the inviting length of them.

“Thank you,” he breathed and Jared’s grip relaxed. Jensen leaned forward and interlocked his fingers with Jared’s and then gradually lowered himself back down, pressing their hands so that they framed Jared’s head. He rolled his hips against Jared’s and the omega groaned low and long in response.

“Beautiful,” he exhaled in Jared’s ear, breathing the omega in. “So beautiful for me.”

Before Jared could say anything in return, Jensen kissed him deeply, tongue demanding entrance. Jared gulped and Jensen plunged inside. The omega’s taste was all the sweeter for the candy he’d eaten. Jensen licked along the roof of his mouth, testing and prodding at the dips and divots he discovered along the way, before tangling with Jared’s limber tongue. While they battled that way, Jensen didn’t stop the downward pressure of his hips against Jared’s. Part of him, mostly his alpha, demanded that he shed his own jeans, but the small, rational part of Jensen’s mind knew his Levi’s were the only thing keeping him in check, strangling his hard cock in the process. He wanted tonight to be about giving and not taking. Not yet, at any rate. That would come soon enough.

Eating every muffled sound that escaped Jared’s mouth, Jensen finally tore his lips away, dragging his rough, stubbled face down Jared’s swan-slender throat. When he latched onto the omega’s bobbing Adam’s apple and sucked hard, Jared wrapped his forearms around Jensen’s neck and urged him closer, thrusting his rigid cock against Jensen’s. Jensen wedged a hand between their bodies and managed to wrap it around Jared’s erection. The scorching, soft skin was drenched in pre-come, making the first slide over his rigid length as easy as a hot knife passing through butter. But Jared’s reaction to the touch was startling and completely unexpected.

His eyes snapped open, scent shifting from ripe arousal to bitter-tinged fear and confusion. “Wha?” he mumbled, muscles tensing beneath Jensen’s strong body.

Jensen stopped immediately, a string of saliva stretched out between his lips and Jared’s neck, pulling his hand away like it had been burned. “What’s wrong, Jared?” Jensen was confused, feeling the omega’s body trying to wriggle away from Jensen, scared and uncertain. “What did I do?” he begged, upset that he had frightened Jared somehow.

Pressing himself back against the pillow jammed between him and the couch, Jared wet his pink lips frantically, heart pounding hard enough that Jensen felt it against his skin. “Why would you do that?” he asked in a small voice.

“Do what?” Jensen wondered, confused and worried. “Did I hurt you?” And he slowly shifted onto his side next to the trembling omega, telegraphing his every move so that Jared would know what to expect. He reached across them for the quilt at the end of the couch and covered Jared’s lower body with it. Then Jensen gently placed his hand over Jared’s heart, hoping to soothe with touch that wasn’t sexual.

“P-put your hand on me there,” Jared stuttered, unable to meet Jensen’s concerned face.

“You don’t like to be touched down there?” Jensen asked him quietly, wanting to understand what was wrong.

Under the slow circles his hand was tracing, Jensen felt Jared’s heart calm. He didn’t spare a glance southward, although he was fairly certain Jared’s erection had wilted, much like the way his was flagging.

Daring to peek up at him, Jared muttered, “I just don’t know why you’d want to.” It was impossible to miss the despair and confusion that was pouring off Jared like a flood.
Jensen urged Jared to roll onto his side. When they were facing each other, he let his arm rest across Jared’s waist while he stared deeply into the other man’s uncertain eyes. He had a sinking feeling he knew what the problem was. “Nobody’s touched you there before, have they?”

Jared shook his head so hard, his eyes were all but obscured by his lank bangs. Jensen resisted the urge to move them aside, respecting Jared’s need to distance and recoup. He used his hair to hide behind and Jensen wouldn’t take that away from him right now. Centuries ago, male omegas had been completely castrated by their male, alpha owners; the parts were deemed pointless and redundant. But Jensen thought that that attitude had long become extinct. Jared’s actions proved it wasn’t true. And although he hated to talk about the other alpha in Jared’s life, Jensen had to know.

“Not even Eric?”

Jared laughed, but it was mostly a sick hiccup. Jensen threw a leg over him, sheltering him with his body. He didn’t push, but let Jared collect himself and speak when he could. “It was before we got together…he and I were talking about a book I was reading for my French Lit class by Michael Tournier.” His voice rose at the end, questioningly. He glanced at Jensen to see if he recognized the author, but the alpha shook his head minutely. “The gist of the story was how an omega named Tupik was slowly coming to the realization, after being exposed to art that glorified the delicacy and softness of female omegas, that it was a state to aspire to. He was brainwashed into thinking that he needed to castrate himself so that he would never attain any attributes that might cause him to be mistaken for a beta or alpha.

“I guess I shouldn’t have been surprised,” Jared huffed and Jensen pressed the pads of his fingers into the warm skin of Jared’s still-exposed back to let him know he wasn’t alone, “when Eric sort of agreed with the protagonist. I wanted him to be horrified,” Jared confessed. “But he pointed out that if Tupik was claimed by a male alpha, his genitals were essentially useless to his owner. An alpha didn’t want another alpha…or one who looked like an alpha.”

Jared closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Jensen’s collarbone. “Yeah, he said ‘owner’ and I let it go,” he eventually sniffed. “Always letting things go,” he muttered so softly, Jensen thought it must have been an accident he had said it aloud. He held Jared closer, worming his left arm under Jared’s neck while his right hand brushed back and forth against Jared’s knobby spine. “I was already self-conscious enough about my freakish height, so I never said anything. I never asked for anything.”

Although he was determined to let Jared say what he needed to, Jensen wasn’t able to let that disparaging comment slip by. “You’re not freakish,” he murmured.

“Kinda am,” Jared mumbled into the alpha’s skin. “And most of the time, I’m glad. I’m glad that when someone sees me that their first impression is that I’m alpha. It’s better that way. Makes it easier to care for Jamie.”

Jensen let his thoughts drift back to the first time he’d seen Jared, walking into the pub with his daughter tucked into his side. Because of his height and the way he’d layered his clothing, Jared did give off the impression of an alpha at first glance. Hell, Jensen had assumed he’d been one. Of course, it only took a few minutes of conversation for him to notice there was something un-alpha about the way he carried himself – an uncertainty – and the deferential manners he couldn’t shake.

“I’ve even bought those pheromone sprays under the counter and used them back in Texas,” he croaked between sniffles.

And Jensen was very familiar with them, since he occasionally had to pick them up for Kim from Fuller’s Pharmacy. He knew you needed a prescription for them and normally they were only
dispensed to betas identifying as alpha, and vice versa, to correct what their biology failed to produce. Omegas were denied them, since it was deemed that they only claimed to be transgender to circumvent state and federal laws. It had just never occurred to Jensen that someone would want them to hide who they were. His mind flashed back to all the daily struggles Jared went through. There were the snide, disparaging remarks from strangers and neighbors. The job he had that he had gotten not because of his qualifications alone, but because of his gender and how the school could leverage that to their benefit. The spoiled students who didn’t respect him. The alpha who had been happy to use him, sire a child with him and yet never publicly acknowledge their relationship or his progeny. And all through this, Jared carried himself with strength and grace, projecting a strong image for his daughter to take comfort in. The walls and fortifications he’d erected to navigate each day were nearly impenetrable. But he’d let Jensen in and even now, ashamed of his own wants and needs, he’d let Jensen see him. He had bared himself to Jensen in every sense of the word.

“You never have to use them again,” Jensen insisted, lightly shaking Jared. “Never. I love everything about you.” He palmed Jared’s face so that the omega was looking at him again. “I love everything about you,” he repeated as he pressed his lips against the candy-pink of Jared’s. When the omega’s eyes fluttered shut, Jensen bestowed kisses to the fragile skin of his lids. “I love you,” he breathed as he pulled away. Jared’s eyes flew open at the declaration, scared and unfocused. “You don’t have to say it back,” Jensen exhaled against Jared’s throat as his licked at a stray droplet of sweat there. “You’re not ready yet,” he paused in his tender assault of the tangy skin stretched taut over the omega’s collarbone to stare deeply into Jared’s kaleidoscope eyes. “I know you feel it in here,” he smiled as he patted Jared’s chest. “I do.”

“Jensen,” Jared began, but the alpha tapped three fingers against the omega’s kiss-swollen mouth.

“Shh,” he urged Jared. “I didn’t tell you that to force you to say anything. I gave you that without any expectations.” Jensen licked his full lips hungrily. “I’d like to give you more if you’d let me. Show you,” he murmured as he trailed kisses down Jared’s firm chest, pausing to nip at his rosy nipples, delighting in Jared’s helpless shivers, “how much I love,” he breathed into the damp skin exposed before him, “every, little bit of you. Will you let me, Jared? Let me show you how much I love all of you?”

Jared raised bleary eyes to meet Jensen’s. “I’ll give you anything you want,” he croaked. “Anything.”

Jensen heaved himself back up to thrust his tongue into the sweet cavern of Jared’s willing mouth. He licked desperately against the hard line of Jared’s teeth, mapping every crevice and sharp edge he found. When he pulled back, he stared long and deeply into the dazed eyes of his omega. “I want everything,” he admitted, breathing hard. “But tonight, I want to give you something. Will you let me?”

Jared, cheeks flushed and chest heaving, only looked confused. Jensen hated it and loved it at the same time. He knew he would be the first and last to do this for Jared. He grinned Cheshire Cat certain as he dropped his lips back down along Jared’s jaw, mouthing and gnawing at the angle of bone below his ear.

Jared bucked up against him as he tongued the tendon that was straining against the thin skin of his neck. “Shh,” he mouthed into his throat. “Wouldn’t want to wake up Jamie,” he nearly smirked, knowing how much he was torturing Jared and reveling in it at the same time. Jared slammed his eyes shut tight and threw back his head, grinding it into the pillow beneath him.

“Keep your eyes on me, Jared,” he commanded, letting his alpha crest to the surface in that moment. “I want you to watch,” he said as he laved at the hard muscles of Jared’s chest with broad swipes of
his tongue. “And you don’t get to do anything else. Watch, but don’t touch,” he demanded, working his way lower.

Brow wrinkled in twisted desire, Jared moaned, “Jensen.” But he kept his hands wound up in the rug beneath him.

Flicking his deep, green eyes up, Jensen licked his full lips in anticipation. “Watch how much I love every inch of you. Watch me, Jared. Watch.”

And he dove back in, dragging his mouth along the smooth skin of Jared’s vulnerable belly, tasting salt and desire with every pass. His cock was fighting against its confinement, but Jensen willed it back. The torture was bearable because this was all for Jared. Raising his chin, he smirked at the hazy eyes he saw fixed on his. “Good boy,” he exhaled. “Such a good boy for me. Do you know how much that pleases me?”

Corded muscles bunched up in Jared’s arms, but he kept still despite the whimpers that slipped past his lips. “Jensen,” he practically wailed. “I-I –” he gasped.

Snatching one of his hands, Jensen pressed it against his staining erection. “This,” he gasped as Jared shakily fondled his cock, “is what you do to me. This is what tasting you does to me. Now,” he demanded as he pushed Jared’s hand away, afraid he would come like an inexperienced teenager, “let me have this.”

Without further thought, Jensen tore the blanket away, revealing Jared once more. His cock, long, cut and curved, was throbbing with desire again, reaching for him. Jensen scooched lower, settling between the omega’s legs. “Keep your eyes on me no matter what,” he told Jared. “See for yourself how much I love every bit of you.”

Without further warning, Jensen wrapped a calloused hand around Jared’s red cock and licked around the nearly purple head. The stuttered breathing above him let him know Jared was as affected as he was. “Tastes so good, Jared,” he assured the omega, eyes closing almost against his will. “Tastes so fucking good.” Lapping at the head, he used his free hand to nail Jared’s jittery pelvis to the floor. The tangy sweetness of Jared’s pre-come was like nectar to his taste buds. He couldn’t get enough, sucking almost violently against the mushroomed top, tonguing into the slit like a man seeking water in the desert.

“Oh, God,” Jared whined, whipping his head to the right, biting his own shoulder to keep himself from screaming.

With excruciating slowness, Jensen worked his way back up to the tip, before letting the hard, angry
member pop free. “I didn’t say you could look away, Jared.” His voice was wrecked, heart pounding against his ribs. “You have to watch me,” he implored the omega. “You have to see this.”

Twisting his head back around, Jared opened his hooded eyes. His hair was plastered to his forehead in dense curls, lips parted, heavy pants billowing his chest erratically. “Jensen,” he pleaded.

“You’re going to come,” Jensen grated out. “You’re going to come because no one has ever made you feel this before.” And he dove back down. Mouth stretching obscenely to accommodate Jared’s length, Jensen hummed as he bobbed his head up and down the stiff flesh, pre-come and saliva leaking past his lips to drench Jared’s cock and the soft curls at its base. Green eyes sharply focused on Jared, Jensen slipped his free hand down to fondle the heavy sack beneath Jared’s cock. The wrinkled, velvet skin contracted at his touch as he rolled the balls in his sure grip and, in a bold move, Jensen let his fingers drift lower to that secret part of Jared nestled between his perfect ass cheeks. Despite the suppressants that Jensen knew Jared was on, his hole was leaking a small amount of slick. Jensen tapped the pad of his forefinger around the swollen rim, not daring to delve inside or taste that inviting fluid despite how much his alpha demanded him to. Tonight wasn’t about the part of Jared that everyone associated with a male omega, but the parts of him he didn’t think of as sexual – the parts of him that he, like Tupik, had been brainwashed into thinking of as dirty and useless. Tracing around the rim, Jensen swallowed at the same time, feeling the head of Jared’s cock tickle the back of his throat. And that was it for the omega.

Jared slammed back his head, overcome, grunting as the first strands of come striped across Jensen’s tongue. He fisted Jensen’s short strands tight, moaning and thrashing as Jensen pulled himself off Jared’s throbbing cock to jack him to completion. As much as Jensen wanted to swallow down every drop of Jared’s, he wanted to watch the first time the omega came more. He worked his hand up and down Jared’s length, murmuring words of encouragement as he did. “So good for me,” he husked as his thumb played with the head of his twitching cock, hot fluid pulsing against it. “Look at you,” he marveled, as a pink flush seeped across the omega’s chest and neck. “Look how perfect you are.” White crisscrossed his abs and Jensen had to grab at his own cock to keep from coming at the sight before him.

Still gasping for breath, Jared pried open his eyes, a pained pleasure written all over his face. Jensen couldn’t resist. He released the omega’s spent cock and rushed up his body to hold him close. Burying his nose into the sweat-damp curls stuck to Jared’s neck, Jensen dragged his teeth down the corded length until he reached the erotic join where it met his shoulder. With the omega still shuddering from his orgasm, Jensen’s alpha rose to the fore. He clamped his mouth down and sucked hard, bringing blood to the surface of the skin. Jared grunted and arched up against Jensen’s strong body and came a second time, spattering them both with his surprised release. Jensen growled in approval, lapping the unbroken spot where a claiming bite would go, already darkening with pooling blood beneath the surface.

“So perfect,” he breathed, chest rumbling contentedly. Placing wet kisses along Jared’s cleft chin, Jensen basked in the feeling of Jared’s heaving body beneath his. When he brushed Jared’s damp hair aside, he noticed his eyes were closed. Momentarily concerned, Jensen shook his shoulder and got a sleepy murmur of protest for his troubles. Barking out a wheeze of laughter, Jensen mentally patted himself on the back for making Jared come so hard he had passed out. He continued to lay reverent kisses across Jared’s cheek while he rolled to his side, cradling the omega closer. Eventually, Jared became aware of his surroundings and returned Jensen’s kisses with sloppy ones of his own. He weakly wrapped his arms around Jensen’s shoulders, tugging him nearer with the strength of a newborn.

“Thank you,” Jensen whispered, “for letting me show you how good it can be.”
Licking his lips, Jared rasped, “Why are you thanking me when you gave me that? I-I should be thanking you.” And the omega opened his eyes wide as realization dawned. He groped at Jensen’s fly, clumsily trying to unzip his jeans. But Jensen easily caught his hand, pulled it up to his mouth and pressed his lips to the back of Jared’s fingers.

“Not tonight,” he mouthed against the salty skin. “Tonight was all for you. And before you try and argue with me, trust me when I say you’ll have plenty of opportunities to give as good as you got.” Rubbing his thumb delicately along the crescent skin under Jared’s eye, he smiled at the omega’s disbelieving face. “Sometimes, what makes me happiest is making you happy.” He leaned over and breathed into Jared’s ear, “And I don’t know if I’ll be able to stay quiet the first time you do anything like that to me.”

Another kind of comprehension came over Jared and he blushed harder. “Oh, God,” he moaned, burying his head against Jensen’s chest.

“You can just call me Jensen,” the alpha teased, hands skimming the warm skin of Jared’s back.

Jared lifted his head and smacked Jensen on the shoulder. “Ass. Do you think she heard me?” He tripped nervous fingers across Jensen’s pectorals.

Jerking his chin toward the monitor, Jensen held his breath as Jared strained to catch any sound coming from the electronic device. He sank back into the alpha gratefully when he heard the soft and steady snuffles of his daughter. For such a little thing, she sure could snore. “She slept through it all,” he assured Jared, having kept track of her the whole time. He held his mouth against the top of the omega’s head for a moment before placing a kiss there. “You were so good, Jared,” he exhaled. Jared shivered in his arms.

“So good for me,” he repeated, tipping Jared’s chin so their eyes connected. Jared’s lower lids shimmered in the fading light with pooled moisture. Jensen knew they were joyful tears, but they still tugged at his heart. “I love you,” he mouthed against Jared’s parted lips. “You make me so happy.” When he pulled back, he laid his forefinger against Jared’s mouth. “I don’t want you to say anything back, sweetheart. Not tonight. Will you give me that?” He gently skimmed a path down the center of Jared’s lips with that finger before tapping once against his mouth. Jared nodded slowly.

Slow smile blooming, Jensen rolled them back to how they’d been before, with Jared tucked safely beneath him. As they exchanged lazy kisses, the skin of their torsos slid and squelched with Jared’s drying release. It would get sticky soon enough and uncomfortable. Reluctantly, Jensen shifted off Jared. “Let me get something to clean us up, okay?”

“Are-are you sure there’s nothing I can’t do for you?” Jared stuttered uncertainly, eyes wavering from Jensen’s face to his groin and back again.

Sliding a hand along Jared’s cheek, Jensen replied, “You already have.”

Jared’s eyes fluttered shut and a small smile danced across his lips. With some difficulty, Jensen hopped up to a squatting position. The gunshot crack of his knees when he stood competed with their noisy fire, the sound making Jensen grin nervously. Nothing like sounding your age to your younger lover. And the walk to the kitchen was a little difficult, Jensen’s gait hampered by his still-hard cock pounding relentlessly against his zipper. He clenched the countertop fiercely, willing it to subside, because he’d meant every word he’d said to the omega. He really did want tonight to be about Jared’s pleasure. And he wanted that the first time he’d told someone he loved them not to hear the words parroted back in a knee-jerk response. He needed them to sink into Jared’s skin, his heart, and his soul. He already knew how the omega felt and he could easily wait until Jared was ready to give voice to those feelings.
Opening the hot water tap, Jensen moistened a gingham dishtowel and brushed roughly against his skin, removing the flaking remains of Jared’s release with a certain amount of disappointment. It had been indescribably erotic to be marked by his omega and he couldn’t wait for it to happen again. When he was clean and back under control, Jensen padded back into the living room with a fresh towel for Jared. What he saw when he stood in the doorway had his cock immediately rising to full hardness again.

His omega was stretched out on the rug, still naked, skin glistening in the firelight. He was hesitantly fondling his cock with one hand while he brushed against the darkening patch of skin where Jensen had marked him with the other. Lower lip rolled into his mouth, there was a fine, white line where his teeth viciously trapped that pink flesh in place. Jensen froze where he stood, helplessly entranced as Jared’s strokes came stronger and faster, his confidence and desire growing each second. Eyes squeezed tight, Jared thumbed the head of his cock, smearing the wetness across his swollen member while fondling the blossoming bruise at the crook of his neck.

Jensen swallowed hard, unable to catch his breath. He had never watched a partner pleasure himself alone and he was shocked how erotic this unintended show was to him. Water dripped onto the floor where his grip around the damp towel had become steel and his toes curled against the hardwood floor hard enough he was certain his nails had gouged furrows into the floorboards. He watched, breathlessly, as Jared shakily let his fingers trip down the length of his fully erect cock to cup his balls briefly, before letting a naughty finger disappear beneath his sack. Jensen licked his lips hungrily, chest heaving, silently encouraging his omega to go further. Jared suddenly stabbed his finger inside himself while pressing into the bruise on his neck ruthlessly and that was all it took.

“Jensen,” he moaned brokenly, come dribbling over his quivering abs.

Jensen was undone. He came in his pants like a horny kid. His knees wobbled and he clawed blindly at the doorframe, suddenly needing its support. The dishtowel, all but forgotten, hit the floor with a wet plap. Pressing his forehead into the doorframe, Jensen panted and gasped as the damp spot on his denim spread. He’d never lost it like this before, frightened and elated in the same instant. Rolling his head against the wooden border, he eventually collected himself enough to look back at Jared.

He was splayed out, spent and sated. Jared’s chest rose and fell heavily with the effort to catch his breath and his skin was a rosy red. Weakly, he pawed at his neck, still caressing Jensen’s mark while his cock spurted out the last of his release as it wilted against his damp hip. The low, satisfied hum his omega issued vibrated inside of him and Jensen sucked in a great gulp of air. Jared, too overcome by his orgasm, was unaware he’d been seen and languished contentedly by the fire. Jensen managed to retrieve the dishrag and, after a minute to collect himself, made his way on unsteady feet.

“Wha?” Jared mumbled when Jensen swiped the first pass of the still-warm towel across his stomach.

“Shh,” Jensen urged him, reverently wiping down Jared’s body, still overcome by what he had seen. This close to Jared and his sweet scent, he was struggling to rein in his alpha. It was a battle since he’d seen firsthand how Jared desired him. “You must have nodded off,” he offered lamely, wanting to keep what he’d seen a secret for now.

Jared all but purred at the touch of the soothing cloth against his sweaty skin, shifting and twisting beneath Jensen’s touch. “Must have,” he murmured happily and Jensen was glad he had kept quiet about what he saw, loving the way Jared relaxed against his hands and didn’t try to cover himself in embarrassed discovery. He vowed to tell Jared soon about how he wanted to see him pleasure himself. Jensen definitely wanted to witness that again and again, still shaken by how affected he had been with Jared’s self-gratification.
When Jared was clean, Jensen reluctantly collected the quilt and began to cover his omega with it. “C’mon,” he gently urged Jared to sit up.

“Huh?” Jared mumbled, confused and dazed, but compliant in Jensen’s arms.

“You can’t sleep down here. You’ll hurt your back,” he explained softly, helping Jared find his balance and wrapping the quilt around his shoulders.

“Why not?” he nearly whined, sounding exactly like his daughter in that instant.

Chuckling under his breath, Jensen slowly steered him towards the staircase. “Because you and Jamie have school tomorrow,” he explained patiently.

At the first step, Jared turned and asked, “Stay tonight?” The quilt shifted, baring the shoulder Jensen had marked and the alpha howled inside of him at the sight.

“I want to,” he whispered before pulling Jared in for a last kiss. When they parted, he continued, tucking a lank strand of hair behind Jared’s ear, “But we didn’t tell Jamie I might spend the night. We need to talk about this with her first.”

Jared all but pouted at Jensen’s declaration, but Jensen saw he couldn’t bring himself to argue with his logic. “All right,” he sighed. “It’s just…I…”

Jensen gathered him close. “I know,” he replied. “I know. I’m going to be dreaming of you all night, too.” He kissed Jared again before half-heartedly letting him go. “Off to bed, sweetheart. You’ve got school in the morning.”

Jared gave him a small, sweet smile before reluctantly trudging upstairs, quilt spilling behind him like a king’s robe. Jensen watched him disappear upstairs, silently glad Jared hadn’t noticed his come-soaked jeans. He wasn’t sure he could have stuck to his guns if Jared had tried a little harder to convince him to stay. But, he told himself as he walked back over to the fire, he really did want to let Jamie know when he started spending the night. It was a change that was going to affect the three of them.

Carefully stoking the fire and making sure the iron screen was firmly in place to keep sparks from flying out, Jensen hunted around for his dog tag. Slipping the familiar weight back over his head, he couldn’t keep his eyes from drifting over to the disheveled rug and what a gorgeous sight Jared had made – spread out and practically wanton before him. He closed his eyes and pressed the heel of his hand against the wet mess at his crotch, unwilling to get hard again when he couldn’t stay. Letting out a deep breath, Jensen collected his shirt and candy, since he didn’t want Jamie to think he hadn’t appreciated the gift. Once dressed, he stepped out into the bitter chill of the October night.

The frigid air sobered up the last of his sex-hazed thoughts. He marched briskly to his truck, latching the gate behind him. He fished around for his keys, gaze traveling up to Jared’s bedroom. Leaning his forearms against his truck roof, he waited until he saw the lights flicker on. A dark silhouette glided by the curtains, lingering for a second like it might be regarding Jensen below. Then it disappeared and Jared’s light snuffed out.

Jensen tapped the roof of his Chevy once. “G’night, baby,” he whispered with a smile and opened the door to his truck. Falling into the familiar valleys of the worn driver’s seat, Jensen decided that October might just be his favorite month of the year. His truck grumbled to life and he drove off into the night, singing under his breath. Yeah, October had been an awesome month.

Too bad November rolled around and everything went to shit.
Chapter End Notes

There is only one act left. I hope to finish it in one chapter, but it might take an additional one to wrap up.
Chapter 7

November blew in like an ill wind, cold and bleak.

The first week, the election was – understandably – the only thing people were talking about. And people were talking. The pub swelled to capacity each night as folks convened there to discuss quietly (and some not so quietly) who was going to win and submit their suspicions why. The Pitch & Roll offered them breathing room away from homes that had grown strained under the differing opinions. True Mainers kept their sentiments close to their chests when it came to admitting who they’d personally cast their ballots for and tended to speak in generalities, but plenty of those “From Away” like Callum and Ben, were eager to share their views whether anyone wanted to hear them or not.

“Hey, basement dweller,” Callum sniped to Brock Kelly, “pass me the peanuts, would ya?” Barely legal, Brock had graduated from high school three years ago and followed in his alpha’s footsteps as a fisherman. Jensen secretly suspected it hadn’t been a hardship sticking close to home since he had a crush on a younger alpha, Colin, who was still in school. Once Colin graduated, Jensen figured that Brock would go wherever he did.

The dark-haired beta curled his upper lip, but slid the basket roughly down the bar, a few nuts spilling out in the process. Jensen snapped his bar rag briskly against the surface, wiping the fallen ones up. Brock had the grace to shrug his shoulders sheepishly.

“What?” Ben teased as he cracked open a shell, letting the flakes of skin fall everywhere like confetti. “Don’t like the name? It’s what that knot-busting omega called all you democrats that didn’t vote for her. She’s a real class act.”

“Like that blowhard alpha is any better,” Brock grumbled, half under his breath.

“Jealous of the knot, baby?” Callum leered. “If you want one so bad, I got one for you right here.” And he grabbed at his crotch obscenely.

Before Brock could say anything else, Jensen slammed his hands down on the bar loud enough to be heard over the television playing behind the bar. “Enough.” Dominant alpha pheromones rolled off him despite his best efforts to rein them in. “I will not tolerate that kind of talk here. Ever.” He kept his voice low, the calmness a deadly counterpoint to the others’ earlier bluster.

“Against the rules? Talking about knots hurts that alpha wannabe’s feelings so bad that she doesn’t want anyone to mention ‘em?” Ben egged him on, only daring to disparage Kim because she wasn’t present.

Shoulders seemingly broader by the second, Jensen carefully explained, “I won’t tolerate it.”

“Don’t you need to clear that with your trans owner first, Jensen?” Callum scoffed, licking his lips. “You’re just her little guard dog anyway.” He leaned from one side to the other on his bar stool, trying to look past the enraged alpha. “Doesn’t she keep your knot in a jar on the shelf somewhere?”

Grinding his jaw, Jensen meticulously folded his rag and set it on top of the bar. He flattened his right hand over it. “That’s one of my rules.”

“Lap dogs don’t get to make rules,” Ben jeered, “only follow them.” Callum chuckled and the two clinked their drinks in solidarity.
“No, but owners do,” Jensen exhaled, “and since I am one of the two owners of this pub,” he paused, tendons popping out along his hand and forearm as he pressed mercilessly into the rag, “let me spell it out for you.”

The two alphas lowered their beers and fidgeted uncomfortably under Jensen’s unflinching gaze. The place had grown eerily still with only the droning voice of the news anchor making any sound.

“Everyone is welcome to come in,” he said clearly enough for all to hear, “but to stick around, the management requires that you keep a civil tongue in your head. You get rude, lewd or threatening and you will find yourselves on your asses on the other side of that door.” And he pointed to the main entrance for emphasis, arm rippling with bulging muscles. “Clear enough?”

There were murmurs from the back and nods all around.

“Now, fellas,” he said, his toothy smile that of a predator, “care to close out your tab or do you want another round?”

The older alpha mumbled something about the tab while Ben shifted on the stool to fish his wallet out of his back pocket. By the time Jensen returned with their bill, the two had slipped out, crumpled dollars tossed haphazardly on the bar only enough to cover their check. Jensen hadn’t expected a tip and wasn’t disappointed that there wasn’t any, his mind flashing back to Jared’s first visit and the collection of coins he’d left behind to make sure Jensen was compensated with a fair gratuity. As he smoothed out the bills and collected the empties, he realized that several of his regulars were watching him surreptitiously and talking amongst themselves. He gave a curt nod in their general direction, noting no one other than Ben and Callum had departed. It was only when he was loading dirty glasses into the dishwasher that it hit him.

He had blown his silent partner cover all to hell and back.

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The next morning, Jensen waited nervously for Kim to show up and start the pub’s opening prep for lunch. Rising before dawn despite the late night, he had debated about calling Jared before the teacher left for work, but ended up giving it a pass. The omega was going through his own personal brand of hell since Principal Lehne thought it was a “once in a lifetime” learning experience for the school to conduct their own version of the election, with one student standing in for the Democratic nominee and another for the Republican one. Needless to say, their “mock” election had been as filled with vitriol as the actual one, leaving Jared nowhere to escape from it all. Jensen wasn’t about to add to the younger man’s discomfort by replaying last night’s events, so he waited it out alone. It didn’t stop him from missing Jared, because they hadn’t spent any time together since that last, memorable evening and Jensen ached for his company. But life, in the form of work, conspired against them. Jensen paced back and forth beside the door.

When Kim finally arrived, she didn’t even get a chance to put her key in the lock before Jensen ripped open the door hard enough that she stumbled.

“I outed us,” he said in a rush, chest heaving with nerves.

Slightly startled, Kim was quick to compose herself. “Is this something I need to tell Bri about?” she smirked, jamming her keys back in her jeans’ front pocket. Closing the door carefully behind her, she gave the place a quick once over, finding nothing out of order, before settling back on Jensen. “What’s up, doll?”

Unusually nervous, Jensen was practically wringing his hands. He didn’t realize that until Kim
moved closer and covered them with her own. “Jensen,” she said gently, rubbing her thumbs along his knuckles, “what happened?”

“Ah, Kim. I shot off my big mouth and announced to the bar last night that I was one of the owners,” he said, tripping over his words.

“And?” she prodded him helpfully.

“And?” he repeated dumbly. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Hon, you are one of the owners,” she said like she was explaining something to a child, squeezing his hands comfortingly.

“But we decided to keep quiet about that,” he muttered, freeing his hands from hers.

“Yes, because that’s what you were comfortable with. We compromised, because I never wanted that. But you did.” She started to unbutton her coat.

Turning around to stomp over to the bar, Jensen slammed both hands down on it. “Well, the cat’s outta the bag now.”

“Good,” Kim said, firm and strong, every inch a leader. “It’s about time.”

Jensen’s stiff shoulders sagged and he let his head drop forward. “I wanted things to be easier for you,” he confessed, splaying his fingers along the smooth, wood counter and leaning his weight onto his forearms. “And the first time my pride is insulted, I shoot off my big mouth. Some partner I am.”

Kim chuckled and stepped up beside him, facing the shelves of liquor that Jensen had not only restocked late last night, but meticulously polished and shined. “We got an inspection coming up that I don’t know about?” she joked, jerking her head towards the sparkling bottles.

“Huh?” Jensen asked, reluctantly facing her. “Oh,” he said once he saw what she meant. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“I can tell.” And she gently brushed her fingers under his eyes. “You got smudges, hon.”

“Kim, all I ever wanted was for this,” and he swept his arm out across the bar, “to run smoothly for you. For us.”

“And it has, Jensen,” she assured him.

“But now…” he trailed off.

“Now might be a little different,” she shrugged one shoulder, “and it might be same shit, different day.” They laughed at the phrase, used by both of them more times than they’d care to admit during their Navy days. Ducking down to catch his eye, Kim continued, “I’m okay with whatever happens, Jens. Really.”

Shaking his head, Jensen laced his fingers together on the bar. “I see what Jared goes through every, frickin’ day and I wouldn’t wish that on anyone. How,” he turned his partially bloodshot gaze toward her, “does that not wear on the soul eventually? I want people treating you with the respect you deserve. I don’t want them running to me like I somehow outrank you.”

Pursing her lips, Kim shook her head slightly. “I wish I could lie and say it gets easier, but it doesn’t. And I don’t have it half as bad as omegas like Jared do. I think,” she said after a pause, “you get
You have to. Your hide gets thicker. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, isn’t a weight to bear, but you have to put one foot in front of the other and keep moving forward. And, if you have friends, you know you can stumble once in a while because they’ll keep you on your feet.” She grinned at him, cockeyed and certain.

Jensen exhaled loudly, breath tumbling the dust motes already spinning in the uneven shafts of late morning light. “I am sorry, Kim.”

She patted his hand confidently. “I’m not. It’s about fuckin’ time.”

“Really?” His voice was uncertain but hopeful.

“Jensen, sometimes you have to get up in people’s faces about this shit. Not in a rude way or anything like that, but remind them that you’re here and that you matter. Even good people can be oblivious,” and she patted his hand again.

Jensen’s expression fell, drowning in a new wave of guilt. He’d let her down at some point.

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Not willfully oblivious,” she hastened to add. “I’ve noticed that good people tend to give everyone the benefit of the doubt because they’re good. They don’t think that people can be as crappy as some can. They sometimes don’t get that society doesn’t treat everyone fairly. But when they see it firsthand, they become aware. And awareness is one of the things that leads to change.” She smiled at the end and bumped against his shoulder. “Let’s make some change.”

He opened his mouth, but she twisted around and slapped her hand over it. “If you apologize to me one more time, I’m gonna smack you.” She studied the bar closer. “But,” she teased, letting her hand fall away, “if your guilt gets the place this shipshape, I might have to hold it over your head for a few weeks.”

Jensen chuckled wetly and nudged his shoulder back against her firm one. “I’d happily do it.”

“You say that now,” she smiled warmly, “but will you still love me when you’re muckin’ out the grease trap?”

“I never loved you,” he deadpanned.

“Liar.” She took a deep breath and let it out through her nose. “Seriously, when the election is over, things are going to get better.”

“You think so?”

“Jens, it can only get better with an omega with her track record in office,” Kim fervently replied.

“Her record is what’s got me concerned,” he confessed quietly. There had been a last-minute flurry of negative press in the mainstream news released about the democrat. “Lot of scandals associated with her name.”

“Anyone in politics as long as she’s been is going to be associated with some negativity. I don’t think anyone’s implying that D.C. is the land of milk and honey. She was never convicted of any wrongdoing by any court or committee of the land.” Kim pushed away from the bar and started to walk around it, heading for the kitchen.

“It’s the court of public opinion I worry about,” Jensen told her. “It isn’t often fair or forgiving.”
Hanging her jacket up behind the bar, Kim wrapped an apron around her waist. “The polls all show her with a healthy lead, so don’t sweat it. Besides, with the crap that alpha is spewing, he doesn’t even have his own party’s support anymore. They’ve all but disavowed him. Go home and get some sleep,” she waved him off happily, heading into the kitchen to get a start on the food prep before DJ showed up. “You look like shit.”

Jensen straightened up, but didn’t rush over to the stairway to his place. “Are you sure?” he asked, worry still lingering.

“That you look like shit? Yeah, I’m sure.” Kim smiled indulgently. “I can take care of myself,” she assured him seriously. “But, if I need help, you’ll be the first one I call. Well, maybe Bri. She does have a badge and a gun. Sexy as fuck.”

Pausing in the doorway, he drummed his fingers against it before unconsciously straightening the drawing Jamie made that he’d framed and hung at the bottom of the stairs. “I hope you’re right about the election.” Dragging his hands though his short strands, he heaved out a sigh. “God, it will be good when this is all over.”

“Only a few more days to go,” she cheerfully hummed, opening and closing the doors to various refrigerators, “and then it’s going to get really interesting.”

“Right,” he murmured. “I’ll be upstairs if you need me.”

Poking her head around the corner, Kim winked at him. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’re right, you know?”

“About what? There are so many things to choose from,” she grinned, balancing a refrigerator drawer of vegetables in one hand and fruit in the other.

Jensen gave her a tired smile. “That I love you.”

Her smile became soft. “Right back at you, doll.” And she ducked out of sight, the sound of pots and pans clattering in her wake.

Jensen, smiling despite his worries, trudged upstairs after he looked one more time at Jamie’s drawing – him asleep on the couch with Jared watching over him. It always cheered him up. He decided he’d stick close for the rest of the week just to make himself feel better, because Kim was probably going to be fine, just like she assured him. That didn’t stop him from being protective of the family he’d cobbled together for himself. Just a couple more days and everything would calm down.

Just a couple more days.

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After 2:30 a.m. on what was technically November 9th, the world kind of turned upside down when the omega who everyone had predicted to win called in her concession. Even Jensen had to admit to no small amount of shock when the night had worn on and, as if defying common sense, state after state on CNN’s map rolled over to red. The omega’s early lead dwindled rapidly and despite nabbing many of the big-ticket states in terms of electoral votes and leading in the popular vote, it wasn’t enough to stem the red tide that drowned the election map. She’d won the battle but somehow lost the war. The news anchors appeared reluctant to admit what was happening before their very eyes – a shocking victory by the bombastic and ultra-traditional alpha. What most mainstream news agency had derided for months and had poll after poll to back them up as an impossibility had come to pass
after all. How had they gotten it wrong? Jensen believed there would be some deep soul-searching amongst the media because they shouldn’t have been so off-base with at least sixty million people choosing him.

The few patrons who had lingered behind, despite the pub being technically closed (Jensen had stopped serving alcohol at 2 a.m. exactly but couldn’t bring himself to kick anyone out – watching the final results was a lot like driving slowly past a car wreck you know you should look away from but don’t), drifted away, shell-shocked like returning soldiers, muttering in their confusion. It might have been that numbness, or the glaring absence of the town’s more vocal Alpha (the man had taken to calling himself “The Alpha”, capital A and all, like an antiquated pack king) supporters that had kept things rather tame at The Pitch & Roll. Jensen wouldn’t appreciate what a blessing that had been until it was almost too late.

The next couple of days, Jensen was torn. He wanted to see in person how Jared was coping, not just the brief snippets of conversations they shared via text messages and phone calls. But the alpha was loath to leave the bar during the day, unsure how Kim might deal if any shit came her way on the heels of his announcement and the election’s turnout. She was angry and disappointed. And Jared had been staying late after class, discussing some project with Stephen, which left Jensen no opportunity to visit him before needing to be back at the bar. In the end, he hung around the pub.

“Those smug bastards all but promised us she had it in the bag,” she grumbled to him, chopping up potatoes next to DJ, while Jensen peeled. “And all it was, in the end, was a political echo chamber and nobody noticed we were sitting in a filter bubble.” Their beta cook was equally crushed, having hoped that the Democratic nominee would continue and expand on the work that their current president had accomplished in her eight years in office. He had been unusually quiet, though, grieving in his own way. But the savageness with which he all but mangled his potatoes proved that still water ran deep.

“Too busy sitting around and talking to each other rather than honestly reporting the news. If they’d focused more on the concerns of folks in Middle America, instead of choosing a few, fringe people to poke fun at and mock, maybe more Democrats would have taken notice.” She paused to brush her hair – once again its natural, dark brown – out of her eyes. “Sure, I like to think my neighbors care about what I go through, but I’m not fool enough to think they’d put my welfare over their families’ well-being. Standing up for me isn’t going to put food on their tables or save their jobs. I know what it’s like to feel marginalized and forgotten,” she patted a clean hand against her baby-blue t-shirt emblazoned with Ask Me About My Trans Agenda in pink, cursive script. “I can’t blame the folks who bought his promises to bring them back jobs. It’s what they needed to hear. He promised to fix things and they ate it up.

“That’s where I think she failed,” Kim continued, “by passing them over and not even visiting some states like Wisconsin, simply counting on their vote without sharing her plans with them in person. They needed to hear it from her. And the name calling,” Kim finally added. “She didn’t have to sink to his level, calling his supporters and her former rival’s some crappy things. Hell, even the news got in on it. Once she did that, she lost the moral high ground.”

“Yeah,” DJ finally spoke up. “My dad was a hard-working man. Voted Democrat his whole life. Literally worked himself to death, dying of a heart attack on the job five years ago. He was a proud alpha, happy to be known as a blue-collar worker, you know?” Both Jensen and Kim nodded their heads. “He was able to provide for his family his whole life, which is what mattered to him. And I think it would have broken his heart to be simply labeled an ‘uneducated alpha’ by the press and a lot of the omega’s supporters, you know?”

“There are a lot of hurt feelings all around,” Jensen eventually said. “Maine has voted Democratic for
the last six elections, but this was the closest call yet. We’re almost perfectly divided and you know his win is going to give some people what they think is a license to treat anyone other than cis-alphas like crap.”

“They’re going to try,” Kim replied, “but we’re not going to roll over and show our bellies. We’re going to stand up for ourselves and our rights and dog him every step of the way. I still believe there are enough decent people out there that we’ll be able to stop him from doing too much damage.”

“You think so?” Jensen asked. He wasn’t so sure.

“Hon, if I didn’t, I would probably seriously consider packing my bags and heading north across the border. Living here, it’s not like I’d have to run far. And I don’t mean that as an empty threat like a lot of those entertainment people were blustering on about, like their life was suddenly going to become untenable. If I was truly afraid, I’d do it without a second thought.”

Jensen laughed, despite the unease her statement about fleeing to Canada lodged in him. “We know how you feel about Hollywood,” he quipped and DJ rolled his eyes.

“Except for that one show about a pair of brothers hunting ghosts,” the beta joked. “I don’t know what you see in that.”

She snapped the towel she’d been wiping her hands with against the cook’s butt, making him yip and scowl at her. “Do not mock Unnatural. It’s a great show about things that go bump in the night and how to defeat the monsters that scare you. It’s a metaphor for the bigger picture, disbeliever.”

“Mm hmm,” Jensen hummed knowingly, finished peeling. He hefted the partial sack of potatoes away, nudging DJ conspiratorially as he passed the slender beta, “things that go bump in the night. Right.”

DJ sniggered into his hand. “And nothing at all to do with those ‘fine alpha butts’ bumping in the night?”

Kim airily waved her hand at them. “I have no idea what you two are talking about. It’s not my fault they happen to be very easy on the eyes. That’s just a bonus to the storytelling.”

“Right,” DJ grinned, collecting the potato slices and carting them off to the fryer.

When Jensen came back from the dry-goods storage, Kim wrapped a hand around his forearm. “And speaking of scary things, I’m fine.”

“Huh?” Jensen mumbled, trying to play dumb.

Her grip was like steel, but her smile was affectionate. “I’m fine, Jensen. Stop hovering, take a shower, grab a few hours’ sleep and go see your family before you need to be back here.” When he started to offer up an explanation, she stopped him in his tracks. “You think I haven’t noticed the parade of lame-ass excuses you’ve come up with to be at my beck and call this last week and a half?”

“Not your beck-and-call boy,” he grumbled.

“Bet you’d be worth every penny,” she winked before growing serious. “People see you hovering when you never did before and some are either going to think I’m weak or that you don’t trust me on my own. Or both.”

Jensen paled. That had never been his intention.

He snapped his head decisively. “I should have looked at it from your side.”

“Your heart was in the right place. Don’t think I don’t know that. Now move it and don’t be late getting back.”

Jensen left the kitchen, but paused to stick his head through the hatch. “Don’t want me to be late, huh? Hot date or is Unnatural on tonight?” He just managed to duck the filthy kitchen rag she threw at him as he fled upstairs.

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Despite Kim’s assurances, Jensen still worried. However, he knew she was right. His lingering around the bar when it was her shift definitely made him feel better, but it didn’t change things. If she needed help, he’d need to wait until she asked for it. Their talk had made him feel a little bit better, seeing her strong in the face of a horrible outcome, but had added to a niggling worry in the back of his mind. As tough as things already were for omegas, how much worse might they get now? And would Jared ever consider running? He thought back to that night when he’d been tipsy from wine and told him that part of why he’d taken the teaching position at Hyde had been “location, location, location”. Was fleeing to Canada, which he’d have to do illegally since unmated omegas weren’t granted passports without mitigating circumstances, always part of his plan? He tried to tell himself he was seeing zebras where there were horses, but unconsciously stepped on the gas pedal all the same, cursing himself for not checking up on Jared sooner.

When the door swung open, the spare key Jared had told him about in one hand and a take-out bag from the pub in the other, Jensen was shocked to hear shouting in the small home for the very first time. It made his hackles rise.

“It’s not fair,” Jamie cried out, stomping up the stairs, not even noticing Jensen. The alpha flinched when her bedroom door slammed a moment later.

“It’s called a punishment for a reason,” Jared called back loudly from the kitchen. “You’re not supposed to like it.”

Jensen stood there, dumbfounded, and tried to make sense of the unfolding tableau. It was like he’d stepped into Bizzaro World with Jamie and Jared shouting at each other. When he finally snapped out of it, he stepped slowly into the kitchen, unsure what he would find waiting for him there. Jared was at the sink, still in his “teacher’s uniform” with his shirt sleeves pushed up along his forearms, practically slamming dishes into the sink and violently washing them. Jensen cleared his throat twice before the omega reacted.

“What now?” he demanded, turning around, flicking soap suds onto the floor. He stepped back when he saw Jensen, obviously startled by his arrival. “Oh,” he swallowed. “I didn’t know you were coming over.”

Gingerly setting the bag of fries and burgers onto the counter, Jensen said, “Maybe I should have called first.”

Jared turned around, bumping his hip against the corner, and focused on the dishes. “Maybe you should have,” he muttered. “I don’t think Jamie will be back down anytime soon.”

Jensen was shocked as hell. Jared had never been short with him before, not that Jensen didn’t think
that record would remain unbroken forever. Couples got into it occasionally. It happened. It just had never happened with them until now.

“What's going on?” Jensen asked, pulling out a chair and sitting down. Every instinct in him screamed that he force the answer out of Jared so he could soothe and repair it, but he knew that if he moved closer, Jared would retreat or, worse, bend to his demands. Instead, he sat down and made himself smaller and less threatening, despite the way the hairs at the back of his neck were standing up.

Facing the sink, Jared brushed a hand across his forehead. There was exhaustion in the gesture. “Jamie got into a fight at school.”

“What?” he gasped, rising to his feet despite his plan to remain unthreatening.

Jared twisted around, bracing his hip against the counter and staining his good khakis with dirty dishwater in the process. “She and Davy got into a fight with some of the other kids during recess yesterday.”

Yesterday.

A frisson of guilt ran up Jensen’s spine. He wasn’t sure what made him feel worse – that whatever this was had happened yesterday and he was only now hearing about it or that Jared hadn’t called him right away. Clearing his throat, he calmly asked, “What happened exactly?” and he sat down again to give Jared the physical advantage.

Jared took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “One or two of the children were picking on Jamie about something.” Jared didn’t elaborate what that something was but it didn’t take much of an imagination to guess what the only omega in school would be singled out for. “Davy didn’t take kindly to it, so he and one of the other alphas started to get into it on the playground during recess.” Jensen’s opinion of Davy rose in leaps and bounds. “Apparently,” Jared continued, unaware of Davy’s growing esteem with Jensen, “the other child was rushing for Davy from behind so Jamie stuck out her foot and tripped him.” Jensen knew it was a mistake to smile, but he couldn’t help himself. That was his girl.

Jared’s face hardened and he whirled around, grabbing a plate and scrubbing it mercilessly. “Maine is an at-fault state, Jensen,” he snapped. “Do you understand what that means?”

And he did. Having been stationed here for part of his military service, he was as familiar with the civilian laws as he was the military ones. Any unmated or unmarried omega involved in any type of physical altercation with an alpha and/or beta was automatically deemed to be the party at-fault for it and was liable for any damages that resulted from it and potentially at risk for jail time as well. The only exception was if the other party was their mate or spouse and there were mitigating circumstance such as extreme abuse that could be proven. Jensen propped his elbow on the table and wearily rubbed his forehead. “Jesus, Jared, what did the school decide?”

Without turning around, Jared answered, “Jamie’s barred from recess for a month.”

“And the alphas?” Jensen had to know.

“A week,” Jared fumed, “because ‘alphas will be alphas’ and they were only acting on instinct.”


It took Jared a long time to answer. “We’re lucky they didn’t expel her. It was within their rights. And without another school to enroll her in, CPS would have become involved.”
Jensen dragged a hand roughly down his mouth, letting the burn of stubble against his palm ground him. “So,” he eventually continued, “you just broke the bad news to her?”

“No, the school took care of that yesterday.” He stopped his angry assault against the dishes to raise his head and stare out the garden window. It darkened fast now that winter was chasing at their heels. The stars peeked out, twinkling in a growing bed of navy skies. “I was handing down my punishment when you walked in.”

Jensen let out a breath. He supposed Jared, as her mother, had to make a point and teach her a lesson, but the school seemed to have already dealt a severe enough blow. “What was it?”

Jared’s head dipped down towards the sink. “She can’t go to Jake’s party next weekend.”

Jensen’s jaw dropped. Jamie had been looking forward to that for over a month now, all but vibrating out of her own skin at the chance to touch the pony that was supposed to be there and maybe even ride it. Shaking his head, Jensen was speechless. That was just too much after the unfair judgement handed down by the school. He couldn’t keep his mouth shut about it.

“Jared,” he began, trying to modulate the tone of his voice to keep it even, “she’s been so excited about that.”

“I know.” The omega’s back was a rigid line against him. “She can’t go to the party.”

Surprised by the severity of the additional punishment, Jensen tried a different tact. “Don’t you think the school’s punishment was enough, especially since it was so unfairly weighted against her?”

If anything, Jared’s spine grew stiffer. “She can’t go to the party.”

Jensen was utterly confused. Nothing this month had made much sense and it only seemed to be getting worse. Fiddling with the edge of the paper bag and debating if he should offer to bring the bacon-dusted fries up to Jamie, he heard an odd sound, like the brittle snap of pond ice thawing in April. Initially unsure of where it came from, the moment Jensen caught the whiff of copper, he practically jumped out of his seat. Crowding up against Jared’s side, he saw lines of red streak across the hand holding what was left of a drinking glass. Jensen gently circled his thin wrist in one hand, guided it over to the empty side of the double bowl sink and turned on the faucet. Jared didn’t utter a sound as Jensen carefully removed the broken glass from Jared’s palm underneath the running water. The alpha winced in sympathy as he flushed the wound, certain there were no more pieces from the faded floral print glass that Jared had apparently broken.

Without words, he led Jared over to the chair he’d only vacated and had him lay his hand on the table. He rummaged around under the sink for one of the many first-aid kits Jared had stashed throughout the house and grabbed a clean dishtowel, too. Jensen pulled another chair over for himself. Using an alcohol wipe, Jensen swabbed over the wound, the burn making Jared flinch and try to yank his hand back.

“Easy now,” Jensen told him gently, inspecting the various cuts to make sure they were thoroughly clean. “I need you to hold still.”

Peering up, Jensen saw Jared had lowered his head, long bangs hiding his eyes away completely. He was breathing hard and Jensen smelled the sorrow coming off him. He let that and the way Jared had explained Jamie’s punishment roll around in his head as he dabbed Neosporin along the two major gashes in his palm. Placing a folded piece of gauze over them, he methodically taped it in place. When he was finished, however, he merely took Jared’s wounded hand in his. “Sweetheart, why can’t Jamie go to the party?”
Jared didn’t raise his head. Jensen just held on, not forcing Jared to say anything. He simply reminded Jared with his physical presence that the omega wasn’t alone and had his support. He rubbed along the back of Jared’s hand with a thumb, drawing patterns against his skin.

Jared took a shaky breath. “Jake’s mother, Alaina, called me last night.”

Jensen kept up the repetitive strokes along Jared’s hand. He knew the red-headed beta Jared was talking about. Before she’d remarried last year, she’d even hit on him a few times, trying to come across all dominant-alpha, thinking that would appeal to him since Kim was his closest friend. He didn’t think she’d ever forgiven him for shooting her down and he felt bad about that, but the airs she continued to put on rankled him to no end.

“She told me several of the parents had called her after hearing about my ‘out of control’ omega child,” he ground out. Finally lifting his head, Jared met Jensen’s stare head on. His eyes shimmered in the yellowed, kitchen light and were blue like Jamie’s. “According to her, they were worried that their kids might be at risk around her at the party and wondered if they should keep them at home to be on the safe side.”

Jensen’s jaw tightened and a muscle ticked along one side.

“So she asked me if I could guarantee that Jamie wasn’t a risk,” he hissed, lowering his voice despite the fact that Jamie was upstairs behind a closed door and couldn’t hear him, “because she didn’t want her son’s party ruined.”

“She asked?” Jensen wondered harshly, knowing how Alaina operated.

Jared laughed painfully, his smile a twisted thing. “I got the message loud and clear. I told her not to worry and that Jamie was already grounded because of what happened and couldn’t attend. In fact, I said I’d been about to call her to let her know and she’d saved me the trouble.”

“Bitch,” Jensen growled and that did it.

Jared huffed brokenly and a few tears spattered against his freshly bandaged palm, still caught between Jensen’s calloused hands. “Now when she goes back to school on Monday, she can tell her friends she’s being punished and can’t go to the party.”

“Instead of one of them saying she’d been uninvited because she’s an omega,” Jensen finished for him.

Bobbing his head, Jared explained, “I’d rather be the villain in her story than have her classmates put her down because of her status. The world’s going to do that to her soon enough. When that happens, I want her to feel strong enough about herself that she can take it.”

Jensen tilted his head, lips parting and staring at Jared, amazed at the depths of his willingness to sacrifice for Jamie. He was reminded for the millionth time what a hard job it was to be a good parent. His understanding smile was apparently Jared’s undoing. The tears started to fall in earnest. Jensen gathered Jared up in his arms and all but pulled him onto his lap. The chair creaked ominously, but held their combined bulk.

He rested his head against Jensen’s shoulder, soaking the alpha’s shirt with hot tears. “I didn’t want to do it,” he murmured as Jensen rocked him.

“I know,” Jensen whispered, pressing his lips to the top of Jared’s head. “I know.”

Raising his damp face, Jared whispered, “But she can’t do things like that. Jensen,” he wound the
fingers of his good hand in the alpha’s shirtfront, “it doesn’t take much for an unmated omega to be labeled incompetent. CPS could take her away from me if they decide I’m a bad parent. I’d do anything to make sure that never happens.”

And there it was. The explanation for that dark fear in Jared’s expressive eyes. Someone could take Jamie from him. Someone could always take Jamie away from him if he wasn’t perfect.

Jensen nodded. “I know you would. But it’s going to be okay,” he offered, brushing away a stray tear with his thumb. “And I don’t know how I can make that promise right now, but it will be. We’ll figure something out together, okay?”

Jared rolled in his lower lip, but jerked his head up and down.

Jensen paused to collect himself and frame his next statement carefully, because he had no desire to make Jared feel any worse than he already did. “I’m sorry I’ve been so busy at work that I wasn’t here for you guys yesterday.”

Reluctantly releasing his swollen lip, Jared admitted, “I should have called you about it, but I was shocked and confused. And I-I…”

“You’re not used to having someone you can depend on, right?” Jensen verbally nudged him. The admission made his inner alpha snarl, knowing he’d failed to make his omega understand he wasn’t alone anymore.

Casting a worried gaze his way, Jared was quick to add, “I know you care about us, Jensen. I do.”

Jensen smiled, small and sad. Patting Jared’s chest, he said, “But you don’t believe it yet.” When Jared’s expression grew stricken, Jensen was quick to shake his head and place three fingers against the omega’s reddened mouth. “S’okay, sweetheart. You will eventually.” Jensen slid his fingers from Jared’s lips along his cheek to comb away some of his hair. With little urging, Jared leaned closer and Jensen’s mouth closed over his in a kiss that was more comfort than passion. Now was not the time for anything else.

When they pulled apart, Jensen’s eyes flicked up to the clock and he groaned. Jared started to stand up. “Have to go in, huh?” he said, already knowing the answer.

Jensen reluctantly let him go. “Yeah, I do.” With Jared standing between his legs, Jensen hugged his waist and pressed his face against the omega’s hip. “Can I stop by tomorrow, since I’m off this weekend?”

The fingers of Jared’s good hand brushed along his scalp and Jensen hummed in approval at the welcome touch. “Of course. Something tells me she’s still going to be angry with me and Jamie will need a friend she can vent to.”

Jensen stood up, pressing against Jared’s body through the entire process, and pulled him snug against his chest. “Something tells me,” he mimicked, “that she won’t be the only one who needs to vent. Or a friend.” Giving Jared a final – albeit reluctant – kiss, he motioned to the bag of cooling take-out. “Please eat something,” he urged Jared.

Jerkling his chin toward the sink and the dishes, Jared countered, “We already had dinner. I was anticipating an early night after I broke the bad news to Jamie.”

“Mm hmm,” Jensen hummed. “And I know you. Please, eat some for me?” It was a plea and a directive all rolled together.
Jared ducked his head shyly. “Okay.”

Feeling mollified, Jensen cupped Jared’s cheek and dragged his thumb along its length. “Thank you,” he said sincerely before stepping out into the evening’s gloom.

He barely registered the short drive back to the pub and was still vibrating with the anger he hadn’t shown in front of his omega when he got there. The place was slow for a Friday night, but not unexpected since the election. In fact, after sending Kim home to watch her ghost-chasing brothers, that only left him and two customers in the place. And, surprisingly, Jensen found himself spilling what had happened to Jared with them.

“What a bitch,” Jeff grumbled. “I don’t care what your beliefs are or who you support. Nobody should treat a child poorly.”

Samantha Ferris, the beta who owned Ferris Stables, took a swig of her bourbon, grimacing at its burn going down. “I’m the one supplying the ponies for the Huffman’s party. Maybe they’ll be acting colicky next week and I won’t be able to rent any out while I keep an eye on ‘em,” she offered in her smoky voice. Morgan chuckled and bumped shoulders with her.

“You got a mean streak in you. I like that,” he growled approvingly.

Jensen laughed quietly as he refilled the beta’s bourbon. When she went to object, he waved her off. “On the house after that offer. And thanks, but no thanks. It’s like you said, Jeff, nobody should treat a child poorly. It’s not Jake’s fault his mother is a…” and he circled his hand in the air, trying to find a diplomatic way of describing Alaina.

“Hellspawn?” Samantha offered.

Morgan laughed so hard, his dimples were visible underneath his salt and pepper beard. “Something tells me,” Jeff offered as he drank his beer, “she’d probably be kicked outta hell for trying to take over.”

Jensen threw back his head and laughed long and hard at that. But even as he did so, he sobered up, thinking about how there was no laughter in Jared’s house right then.

“Boy’s got it bad,” Jeff told Samantha.

“What?” the dark-haired woman asked, eyes widening as she took in Jensen’s appearance. “You sweet on that girl’s mother?”

Before Jensen could say anything, Jeff carried on. “Sam, that boy had me desecrate a vintage bench seat for his ’57 Chevy truck to install a safety belt for a child’s car seat.” He raised his eyebrows for emphasis. Samantha whistled lowly. “The things you do for love,” he added sagely. Jensen was caught between a glower and a furious blush.

Leaning back on her stool, the beta grabbed for her bag. Digging around, she finally pulled out her wallet.

“You’re not leaving yet, are you?” the older alpha asked.

Brushing her long hair over her shoulder, she shook her head. She pulled out a card and asked Jensen, “Can I borrow a pen?”

Jensen trotted down to the register and grabbed one for her. “How do you spell the girl’s last name again?” she asked.
Sam wrote something in looping, neat cursive along the back of what appeared to be a business card while Jensen spelled out “Padalecki”, before handing it and the pen back to Jensen.

“This card entitles Jamie Padalecki and one guest to a full day’s riding lesson at Ferris Stables, redeemable during normal operating hours,” Jensen recited. “Samantha, I couldn’t possibly –”

“No, you couldn’t,” she cut him off, “but I can. I don’t care who is president now and I sure as shit don’t care who’s president in a couple of months. That doesn’t change who I am or how I want people to be treated. You tell her she can have her mother or a friend share that lesson with her. Just have them call my number and I’ll handle it personally.” She slammed back her bourbon, smacking her lips after. “Now, if you boys will excuse me, I am going to head to the ladies’ room.”

Both Jensen and Jeff watched her leave. Slipping the card into his wallet, Jensen murmured, “She is something else.”

“Yes, she is,” Jeff sighed. He pulled a blister pack out of his front pocket and popped a piece of gum in his mouth, chewing furiously.

Jensen sucked in his cheeks. He recognized the pale-yellow Nicorette gum, having quit smoking when he’d left the Navy. A haze of smoke was kind of a given at Morgan’s Garage until lately. Spending most of her time outdoors, Samantha had a strong dislike for cigarettes and cigars. Now that glaring absence of nicotine and the pair’s increasing appearances together around town made sense. “The things you do for love,” he said as he refilled Samantha’s glass.

“Huh?” Jeff grunted, still staring off in the direction the beta had disappeared. When Jensen jut out his chin in the direction of Jeff’s shirt pocket, the older alpha kind of shimmied his head from side to side while his lips turned upward. “Smartass,” he smirked.

Jensen cocked one eyebrow knowingly when Samantha returned. “Do you guys mind if I shut the idiot box off and switch on some music?” he asked, flipping his towel at the television.

“That’d be fine by me,” Samantha replied. “They’re not saying anything I want to hear anyways.”

Jensen grabbed the remote and killed the TV. He pulled his phone out of his shirt pocket and set it in the Bose dock on the shelf with the gin and vodka. And just because the first song on his 70’s playlist was a certain Joe Jackson tune about fools in love, he assured Jeff that it was purely coincidental.

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Although he wanted to rush over first thing in the morning, Jensen forced himself to wait. He hoped that maybe Jared and Jamie might talk over breakfast and be on better terms by the time he showed up. To kill time, he pulled out his laptop and did a search of county forms, navigating the government sites until he had the information he needed. Everything was fairly straightforward and clear. Then he did another search for a specific shop in Portland. When he found what he was looking for, he called and they were able to squeeze in an appointment for him for the next day since his request wasn’t overly complicated. With that settled, he went down to the pub’s kitchen and filled his battered, Stanley thermos with chowder and grabbed a couple of lobster rolls for them all, tossing in a half-dozen single serving milk cartons, too. He probably packed more food than they could possibly finish for lunch, but his nerves were wound up and he overcompensated by being a provider.

When he got to Jared’s, one look at the omega – curled up on the couch, dark smudges under red-rimmed eyes – had Jensen’s heart sinking. He rushed to put all the bags in the kitchen and returned to
the young man’s side. He sank down onto the couch and placed a comforting arm around Jared’s thin shoulders. “Hey there,” he breathed quietly.

“Hey,” Jared rasped, voice clogged with emotion. But he leaned his head against Jensen’s shoulder, easing some of the alpha’s discomfort, tucking his cold toes under Jensen’s thigh.

They sat together without saying a word for a few minutes. Another knot of unease loosened for Jensen when he caught Jared unconsciously scenting him. Knowing his presence was enough to offer the omega comfort soothed the alpha in him. “Still no truce between you two?” Jensen eventually asked while trailing his hand up and down the curve of Jared’s shoulder, already knowing the answer.

Jared wiped under his nose, surreptitiously trying to hide a sniffle. “Whatever gave you that idea?” And when he twisted around to face Jensen, his eyes broke Jensen’s heart.

“Ah, sweetheart,” the alpha murmured and kissed him on his forehead.

Jared smiled sadly. “Bitter pills are something a parent has to swallow all the time. But this one is a doozy,” he confessed.

Jensen rubbed Jared’s shoulder briskly like he was trying to warm him. “Do you mind if I go up and say ‘hi’?”

“Only if you don’t mind if I end up eavesdropping on you two?” He motioned to the baby monitor on the coffee table. “I’ve never gone this long without talking to her if I wasn’t working overtime or something.”

“Sure thing, sweetheart,” Jensen smiled and got up.

“Maybe bring her some of those fries that I can smell from here? She only gets to eat in her room on special occasions, so maybe she’ll eat some for you.”

“Make sure you eat something, too,” Jensen told him.

“Sure,” Jared agreed. When Jensen looked back as he started up the stairs, however, the omega had only leaned forward, elbows propped on his knees with his head cradled in his hands.

Standing in front of Jamie’s door, he knocked once but got no answer. He did it again, this time announcing it was him.

“Come in,” came a timid reply.

Jensen pushed open the well-oiled door, nudging it partially closed behind him. At first, he didn’t spot Jamie. But when he walked around her canopy bed, he found her on the far side, sitting on the floor in almost the same position as her mother. She was wearing the purple Pokémon shirt he’d seen her in the first time she had walked into his pub. But her hair was kind of a mess (he guessed she had tried to comb it herself), she still had on pajama pants and her face was almost as pale as Jared’s.

Jensen slid down to the floor and leaned against her bed like she was doing. “Hi, honey,” he told her softly.

“Hi, Jensen.”

“I came over to bring you your favorite fries. You hungry?”
She shrugged her shoulders.

“How about I make a little picnic for us and you have some if you feel like it, okay?”

Another shrug.

Jensen scooted away from her a little and spread out a napkin on the floor between them. Then he took the bag and shook out the fries onto the makeshift tablecloth. He pried the lid off a container of tartar sauce and set it off to the side and another with ketchup sprinkled with pepper, which was Jamie’s favorite. And the last thing he pulled out was a small carton of milk with a straw for her. When he set that down next to the tiny omega, she gave him a half-hearted laugh that ended in a sniff. She was a little, carbon copy of her mother. But the way he had strategically placed the items forced her to turn more in his direction.

For a while, Jensen talked about funny things that had happened at work, pausing every once in a while to eat a fry. Eventually, Jamie caved in, shifted onto her knees and slowly chewed on a fry smothered in ketchup. Jensen felt like they were making progress.

“So,” he finally dared broach the subject after she’d eaten a handful of them, “you and your mommy not having a good morning?”

Jamie shook her head roughly, curls flying helter-skelter. Jensen nudged the rest of the fries her way, but she only shook her head again. Jensen returned what was left to the bag and pushed it out of the way, smiling when Jamie helped him clean up. He just sat there, giving her time to come to him.

“I did a bad thing, Jensen,” she whispered, “when I broke a rule at school.”

Jensen nodded. “That’s a bad thing,” he agreed.

“That wasn’t the bad thing,” she gasped, raising her tiny face up to him, Cupid’s bow mouth trembling.

Jensen was startled, not expecting to hear that. “What was the bad thing, honey?”

Jamie dropped her head and he had to strain to hear what she said next. “I scared Mommy.”

“How do figure that?” he wondered.

Her lower lip kept popping in and out of her mouth as Jamie geared herself up to speak. When she raised her head again, her eyes were wet, but there was a hint of defiance there, too. “I broke a rule at school, but I’m not sorry I did what I did.” Jensen had to bite the inside of his cheek, because smiling then would not have sent the right message. “But it meant breaking a rule and I am sorry I did that. All Mommy has ever asked me is to be a good girl. And a good girl follows the rules, even if they’re stupid ones,” she groused.

“The world has some stupid rules,” Jensen agreed, “but we’re all supposed to follow them.”

“Yeah,” she sniffed, “and because I didn’t, I scared Mommy bad.”

Shuffling closer, Jensen asked, “Why’s your mommy scared, honey?”

Jamie lowered her head again. She twisted one hand up in the excess material of her pajamas nervously. “Because he’s afraid Alpha will come and take me away from him.”

For a second, Jensen thought she meant the president-elect the way she said “Alpha” and then it
dawned on him that she meant her sire.

“You think your alpha will take you away if you’re bad?” Jensen prodded her.

She nodded her head mournfully. “If I’m bad then Alpha will take me away from him. Or the Sea Peas will. But you have a boat,” she realized suddenly. “You’d come looking for me if the Sea Peas took me, right? I don’t know where they take you, but it must be the ocean. You’d help Mommy find me!”

“The Sea Peas?” Jensen had no idea what she was talking about. “Where did you hear about them?”

“The aunties in Texas talked about them when they didn’t think we were listening,” Jamie confided to him. “They always worried the Sea Peas would take the babies away from them if they didn’t do a good job taking care of them. Some of the auntie mommies would cry at night when we were in bed. Mommy cried when he thought I was asleep, too.” Now both her hands bunched up the legs of her pajama pants.

The aunties in Texas? She must have been talking about the other omegas they lived with back there, which meant the “Sea Peas” were probably officers from Child Protective Services – CPS. Jensen, at a loss for words, rubbed a hand against his mouth.

“Do you think Alpha is coming to take me away?” she whispered.

“No,” Jensen spat out and then tempered his tone. “No, honey, I don’t think he’s coming.” He held out his arm and she immediately snuggled against him.

“Why not?” she breathed wetly against his side. “Why isn’t he coming?”

Because he’s an asshole, Jensen thought. Because he threw you two away like you were nothing when you’re everything. But he knew he couldn’t say that to Jamie. Whatever else Eric was, he was the alpha who had sired her. Without him, there would be no Jamie. And he suddenly understood Jared’s “bitter pill” analogy much better. He swallowed hard.

“Jamie,” he hugged her close, “your alpha loved your mommy enough to make you. And he loved you both enough to let you go.”

“Let us go?” Jamie raised her head, looking up at Jensen in confusion with her tired, swollen eyes.

“Yup,” he snapped his head decisively. “He let you go because he knew he wasn’t the best alpha to take care of you the way you should be cared for. He knew there was someone better out there for you both.”

A pair of slender arms wormed their way around Jensen’s waist. “You?” she almost begged him.

“Me,” he agreed firmly and kissed the top of her head.

After a long moment, Jamie shyly asked, “But what about the Sea Peas?”

Holding her tighter, Jensen promised, “They can’t take you away from us.”

“Are you sure?” and her voice cracked on the last word. Her fear was palpable.

Pulling back so that he could look her in the eye, Jensen smiled confidently. “They can’t touch you because I claim you as my own.” And he let go of her so that he could pull out the single dog tag he had started wearing again. With solemn dignity, he took it off and looped it around her neck while
she watched, wide-eyed and reverent. When it came to rest against her thin chest, something heavy settled inside Jensen; something like the weight of love.

With her chin resting against her sternum, Jamie fingered the gleaming metal with awe. “Ackles, Jensen Ross” she read, tracing the embossed tag with her finger. “Does Mommy call you Jensen Ross when he’s mad at you?”

Jensen laughed weakly at the unexpected question. “He probably will, honey. Just give him time.”

“Can I…can I have a special name for you now, too?” she asked. “Not for when I’m mad.”

“Of course you can,” he told her, fighting against the sudden bite of tears at the corners of his eyes.

“Everybody gets to call you Jensen, even Mommy. So…can I call you Daddy Jensen?”

Jensen blinked rapidly to keep those traitorous tears in check. “I’d love it if you’d call me that.”

She let the tag fall against her chest and practically launched herself into his lap. “I love you,” she muttered, breathing the words into his plaid shirt.

He squeezed her tight. “I love you, too, munchkin. So much.” He kissed her head again, letting his mouth rest against her tangled hair.

They sat there on Jamie’s lavender rug, wrapped up in each other, for a long time. Then, despite her best efforts to hide it, Jamie yawned long and loudly.

“Oops,” she mumbled sleepily.

Jensen grinned at her. “How about you take a nap for a while? Maybe later we can all have dinner together. I bet your mommy would like that.” Jamie rubbed her cheek against his chest in agreement.

Jensen held her tighter and stood up. With infinite care, he laid her on her bed, unfolding the spare blanket at its foot and covering her up to her waist.

As he pulled down the shades in her windows, Jamie asked softly, “Will you tell Mommy he doesn’t have to worry now? And that I’m sorry?”

Jensen walked back to her bed. She was curled up on her side, one hand fisted fiercely around the dog tag. Jensen brushed her unruly curls gently with his fingertips. “I will, angel.”

“Thank you, Daddy Jensen. Love you,” she mumbled, already asleep by the time he flicked on the fairy lights woven through her canopy.

“I love you, too,” he whispered back, closing her door behind him.

Walking down the stairs, he knew keeping his promise would be simple. The search he had done earlier confirmed that all he had to do to claim Jamie as his own offspring was file a single form at the county clerk’s office, which he could do first thing Monday morning. That form, along with his government issued ID proving him to be an alpha and a fifteen-dollar filing fee, was all that it would take to make her his daughter. Eric’s right to contest another alpha’s claim expired a year after her birth. Only Jared could stop that process and he would need the results of a paternity test proving Jensen wasn’t her sire to do so. And his research also verified that if an alpha didn’t willingly submit to a paternity test, they couldn’t be forced to provide one. The supposed logic behind that was an alpha wouldn’t go to the effort to claim a child that wasn’t theirs, but, in reality, it only reaffirmed to Jensen how skewed their government was against omegas, hardly granting them any rights of value.
When Jensen got back to the bottom of the stairs, Jared was in almost the same, bowed position he had assumed before. Except this time, his shoulders were shaking and he was clutching the baby monitor instead of his head. Jensen’s stomach churned, worried he had somehow done the wrong thing, crossed a line that Jared wasn’t ready for yet. He padded over carefully, unable to keep himself from scenting the omega and he heaved out a breath of relief when all he smelled was joy.

“Jared?” he inquired softly, touching the omega on his shoulder.

“Jensen,” he croaked, setting the monitor down and clasping Jensen’s hands between his. “You didn’t have to do that.” His face was scrunched up in pained wonder.

Carefully extracting his hand, mindful of Jared’s bandaged one, he sat down beside him and didn’t hesitate to pull Jared into his arms properly. “Yes, I did,” he exhaled into Jared’s ear, when the omega settled against his side. “I was just a little worried how you might take it,” he admitted, pressing a kiss to the delicate skin behind it.

Despite his hurt hand, Jared pushed against Jensen’s chest to face the alpha. “You’ve been there for so many of her firsts and taught her so much in such a short time.” He sniffed. “Loved her when no one else did. Wanted her when her own sire didn’t. No one deserves the right to be her father more than you,” he finished passionately.

Jensen surged forward, fastening his lips to Jared’s. When he pulled back, he held onto Jared’s lower lip, sucking hard. Finally releasing it with a moist pop, he studied the omega’s face closely. The dark circles were as prominent as before and his eyes were still bloodshot. He was as worn out as his daughter and as much as Jensen wanted more, he knew what his omega needed. “C’mere,” he encouraged the other man, shifting back and stretching out the length of the couch. “C’mere,” he repeated, patting himself on the chest. “Lay down with me and sleep for a while.”

“But you’re not tired,” Jared countered. However, he still did what Jensen asked, fitting his lean form half on the alpha and half tucked into the back of the couch.

Jensen reached across him and yanked down the quilt draped along the back of the couch, snapping it out so that they were both covered by it. “I’m not, but you’re beat. And I’d like to just lie here with you for a while. Is that okay?”

Jared did nothing but sigh contentedly against him.

“Monday morning, I’ll go to the county clerk and file the form,” he whispered, tripping his fingers up and down Jared’s spine. “Nobody will ever take Jamie away from us, okay?”

“Thank you,” Jared exhaled, pressing a kiss to Jensen’s heart.

Jensen squeezed him once. “No, thank you.”

Jared shifted in his arms like he might try to argue the fact over who had the right to be more thankful, but Jensen held him until the omega melted into the embrace, body growing heavy with exhaustion. “Love you,” he finally murmured as he fell into a deep sleep, his greatest worry chased away.

At those soft-spoken words, Jensen’s heart swelled and threatened to burst. The alpha cradled Jared closer, resting his cheek atop the other man’s head, feeling like he was finally home.

Because those words? They were everything.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Good news and bad (?) news. The good news - here's chapter 8. The bad news? It's only the first part. This last chapter was becoming unmanageable so I've split it into three parts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Combing his fingers through Jared’s wavy hair, Jensen wanted to bask in the substance of those two words for the entire night. Or, to be honest, the rest of his life. However, he needed to lounge around in bed and stay close the following day after spending his first night with Jared firmly wrapped up in his arms like they were now. Having that appointment in Portland the next morning threw a damn wrench in his “plan”. He wanted to do things right between him and Jared. His worries over Jamie had made him jump the gun, not that he regretted his actions in the slightest. It simply frustrated him that he didn’t have the rest of his ducks in a row yet. But he would soon enough. He just hoped Jared would understand. Reluctantly, Jensen woke him up, enjoying his sleep-muddled, silvery smile by the light of the nearly full moon cutting in from the living room window. Everything was surreal and sharp at the same time in its cold glow.

“Hey there,” he whispered, voice scratchy from disuse. “Sleep okay?”

Jared’s smile deepened, dimples creasing his cheeks. “Best sleep that I can remember,” he admitted, stretching and wiggling contentedly in the alpha’s embrace.

Jensen brushed his lips against his forehead. “You needed it, sweetheart,” he breathed against him. Before either man could say anything else, Jared’s stomach growled fiercely.

Laughing even as Jared’s cheeks pinked up, Jensen pointed out, “Seems like you need something else now. How about you go wake up Jamie and I order us a pizza for dinner?”

“But, Jensen, you brought so much for lunch,” Jared reminded him. Most of the food was still on the table, untouched.

“It’ll be cold by now. Save it for leftovers,” Jensen replied, despite knowing the chowder would be warm in his thermos. Pizza was Jamie’s favorite and he wanted to spoil her a little. “You go on up and wake her while I dig out the takeout menus.”

Jensen sat them both up, enjoying Jared’s weight and scent pressed against him. He used the excuse of reaching for the lamp switch to steal a kiss from his omega. Despite the sleep-sticky breath, it was sweet and tender and far shorter than his alpha craved. They broke apart and Jared staggered to his feet and Jensen preened. There was no point in denying it to himself. He delighted in how he affected his omega with only a simple touch.

While Jared somewhat hesitantly climbed the stairs to Jamie’s bedroom, Jensen put away the mostly uneaten lunch and plucked free the collection of menus that were pasted to the side of the fridge by colorful, alphabet magnets. He shuffled through them until he found the one for pizza delivery and
waited for Jared and Jamie to come down before ordering. It didn’t take long for the pair to shuffle into the kitchen and take a seat at the table that tended to wobble if there was too much weight on the side closest to the back door, subdued but stealing glances at one other when they thought the other wasn’t looking.

After an awkward silence, which lasted all of twenty seconds between the two people Jensen loved more than anything in this world, Jamie was showing Jared her dog tag with quiet wonder and they easily segued – like the last day hadn’t happened – into debating over the merits of pepperoni versus pineapple with no clear winner before placing their order with Dominos. Jared and he were firmly established as Team Meat, while Jamie favored anything the shade of her beloved Pokémon. Sitting together around the tipsy, kitchen table, yellowed light (because Jared still managed to find incandescent bulbs, hating compact fluorescents for being “too cold” and “harsh”) holding the darkness at arms’ length, Jensen leaned back in his chair and smiled.

That gentle, almost secret, smile grew as he watched his family happily babble away as they picked at their pizza once it arrived. Jamie refused to eat with her hands, insisting on a knife and fork, while Jared already had a spot of sauce on his chin. Without thinking, Jensen stretched across the table and thumbed the red smudge away. With Jared’s ever-changing eyes fixed on him, Jensen sucked his finger between his lips, tongue lazily snaking out to lap up the sauce and savor the taste. There was no missing the way Jared’s eyes darkened and tracked his every move or how his breathing sped up. Jensen’s grin was nothing short of wolfish. His daughter’s giggle, however, broke the spell.

His daughter.

“That’s why I use silverware, Mommy,” she intoned sagely, holding up her knife and fork with pride. “That way Daddy Jensen doesn’t have to clean me up like I’m a baby.”

*Daddy Jensen.*

That name wasn’t about to get old anytime soon and his heart did a funny, little hitch as the name rolled off her tongue like she’d always called him that. Jared’s sharp, indrawn breath was unexpected and he flicked his gaze over to him. Jensen worried that maybe he thought it was too soon or inappropriate or a thousand other concerns. That was, until he scented the contentment floating off the younger man and he put his pointless worries aside.

Jared’s eyelashes fluttered and he visibly swallowed, drowning in emotions. “M-maybe,” he rasped, “I don’t mind if he gives me a hand. We all need help occasionally. Right, Daddy Jensen?”

Jamie stopped her jagged, pizza-sawing technique and regarded her mother seriously. “I’m sorry, Mommy, but that’s *my* name for Daddy Jensen. You can call him ‘Jensen’ or whatever other grown-up type name you like…like ‘Jensen Ross’ when he’s naughty,” she added slyly, tapping her finger against the tag. “But ‘Daddy Jensen’ is only for his children.” She resumed her eating like the matter had been settled. And it evidently was.

“You’re right,” Jared agreed and Jamie made approving sounds around a bite of pizza.

“*Course,*” she mumbled.

“*Of course,*” Jared corrected her lovingly.

Wiping her mouth with a Bounty paper towel, she repeated, “*Of course,*” before digging right back in.

Jared stretched out one, long leg under the table and brushed his bare toes against Jensen’s foot.
Jensen relaxed further at the calming touch – appreciating the “no shoes in the house” rule so much more now that he saw a practical application for it – and devoured his dinner while rubbing along the arch of Jared’s slender foot in return. Jared and Jamie talked easily with each other, the shadow of forced separation no longer crushing down on them. And as delighted as Jensen was over gaining a daughter, he was still somewhat saddened that Jared didn’t want more for himself. Not that he expected Jared to demand that Jensen marry him, but he should have asked for some assurance for himself. However, as usual, Jared only worried about Jamie. Jensen reminded himself for the hundredth time that Jared couldn’t shake off a lifetime of habits in only a few months. While Jamie had picked up on a couple of Jared’s fears (and he’d have to eventually tell him about the “Sea Peas”), she was far more resilient, given how Jared had made sure to always project a strong façade whenever he could for her. Her tripping that bully only proved she hadn’t been cowed yet and Jensen swore to himself that he would do everything in his power to see that she continued to grow up just like that. He might have only been a father for little more than an afternoon, but he was more than ready to assume every aspect of that mantle. That just left Jared.

The omega was collecting their dirty dishes and humming under his breath. His quiet, content sounds were not lost on their daughter, who fist her dog tag and blew a noisy kiss at Jensen. He winked at her and she giggled softly. Climbing out of her chair, she went over to Jensen and waved for him to lean closer. “He’s happy,” she whispered sloppily in his ear.

Pulling away with a smile on his face, Jensen copied her hand motion, waving her back. “I’m happy,” he told her right back, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Me, too,” Jared said, still facing the sink.

“Me, three,” Jamie exclaimed.

“That’s not correct, Jamie,” Jared told her. Jensen didn’t think he ever stopped being the teacher.

“But it is, Mommy, because we’re J3,” she reasoned, wrapping her arms around Jensen’s shoulders. “So, one, two and three,” she added, hooking a thumb toward her chest. Jensen caught her up in a one-armed hug from where he sat. “Me, three.”

Jared turned around and stared at the picture the two of them made. Jensen held out his other arm, welcoming and strong. Jared went immediately into his embrace. Tilting his head down to look at them both, he laughed wetly. “I guess we are,” he accepted. “I guess we are.”

“Count on it,” Jensen agreed fiercely, squeezing them both close.

Jamie dropped her head on Jensen’s shoulder. “Can I show this to Davy on Monday at school?” she asked, tugging on her dog tag.

“Honey, you can show that to whoever you want.” Jensen kissed her forehead. “I want everyone to know you’re mine now, too.”

She raised her face with a beaming expression that melted into a yawn of gigantic proportions. “Don’t know why I’m so sleepy,” she grumbled, rubbing at her eyes with her boney knuckles.

Jensen hugged her closer. “It was a big day with lots of stuff happening. That will take it out of anyone.”

She nodded glumly. “Guess so,” she mumbled. Jensen noted she tended to drop words when she was really exhausted.

“Why don’t you let Jen –” Jared started and then corrected himself. “Why don’t you have your
“daddy tuck you in?”

“Okay,” she agreed around another yawn.

Jensen stood and lifted his daughter up, settling her on his hip. For her part, Jamie was mesmerized by her dog tag, holding onto it with one hand and staring at it from where she rested her head on his broad shoulder.

“G’night, angel,” Jared told her quietly, kissing her on her rosy cheek.

“G’night, Mommy. Love you.”

“Love you right back,” he replied.

Jensen smiled at Jared over her head and carried their daughter upstairs. Since she was still dressed in her pajama pants, Jensen decided that was good enough. He put her to bed, flicking on the lights woven through her canopy. By their cheery radiance, he couldn’t help but think she really did look like an angel on her pastel bedding. He sat down beside her and combed some of her tangled curls out of her eyes.

“I know you should probably brush your teeth, but we’ll let it slide this one time,” he told her.

“’Kay,” she yawned. “I’ll do a double-good job in the morning.”

“That’s my girl,” Jensen grinned and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

“I am,” she said with her eyes closed, one hand still loosely holding the metal tag like a talisman. When he moved to get up, she snapped them open and reached out for him.

“Mommy’s yours, too, isn’t he?” There was hopefulness in her words, but they were also stained with worry.

“He will be,” Jensen promised her sincerely. “I want to do it right.” He didn’t know if Jamie would understand what he meant and would still fret over her mother. He debated about explaining what he had planned and wondered if she could keep a secret. Like usual, she was more perceptive than anyone gave her credit for.

“’Kay,” she repeated, clearly comforted and needing nothing more than his assurance. “Then you can stay here all the time, right?”

“Angel,” he said seriously, staring into her deep, blue eyes, “there is no other place I want to call home more than right here with you two.”

“Good. It’s where you belong,” she agreed, eyes sliding shut.

“You’re so smart,” he murmured, kissing her again.

“Mm hmm,” she slurred, already mostly asleep. “Mommy makes sure of it every day.”

Sitting back up, Jensen pulled the covers over her small shoulders, tucking her in. “Mommy made you perfect and I’m going to do my best to help him keep you that way,” he whispered in her ear even though she was already making her raspy, little, snore breaths. He stood up gingerly, not wanting to disturb her with the motion. Standing by the door, he turned off her overhead light, taking in the serene picture she painted, dreaming under a netting of fairy lights, before partially closing the door.
Stepping quietly down the stairs, he wasn’t really surprised to catch Jared singing. Jamie had said he only did it when he was truly happy and worry-free. His choice of songs made Jensen chuckle, though. Melody Gardot had never sounded quite like that.

“I need a hand with my worrisome heart
I need a hand with my worrisome heart
I would be lucky to find me a man
Who could love me the way that I am
With this here worrisome heart
I need a break from my troubling ways
I need a break from my troubling ways
I would be lucky to find me a man
Who could love me the way that I am
With all my troubling ways”

Leaning against the door frame, he watched with growing heat as Jared swiveled his hips slow and easy, head tossed back, bangs messy and eyes closed as he tried to sing the jazzy chorus and didn’t quite hit the mark. That didn’t make it any less sexy, especially with the way Jared swayed to his slightly off-key humming. With slow, languorous moves, he swiped soapy water across the dishes, not really paying attention to what he was doing, backside shifting tantalizingly from left to right and back again in a provocative rhythm. Unable to resist, Jensen crept over on silent feet and wrapped his arms around Jared’s waist while he pressed up against his back. Jared startled and almost dropped the plate.

“Don’t stop,” Jensen breathed up into his ear while slipping his hands under Jared’s shirt to press the pads of his fingers against the omega’s taut abdomen like he could feel the song through his skin.

With a shaky breath, Jared continued.

“I need a man who got no baggage to claim
I need a man who got no baggage to claim
I would be lucky to find me a man
Who could love me the way that I am
A worrisome troubling baggage free modern day dame
Said a worrisome troubling baggage free modern day dame
Ain’t nobody the same”

“I do love you just the way you are,” Jensen growled, licking along the nape of Jared’s neck, tasting salty sweat. He placed a kiss to the damp curls plastered there against his skin. Jared dropped the dish back into the sink with a graceless plop. Water slopped over the side as he twisted around in Jensen’s grip.

“You got your bandage wet,” Jensen murmured, rubbing his groin back and forth across Jared’s.

“Jensen,” he exhaled, winding his arms around Jensen’s shoulders.

Hooking his fingers around Jared’s neck, he pulled the omega closer, mouthing at his pink lips. Jared sighed, eyes closing, and he surrendered himself to Jensen’s touch. Teasing his tongue inside, Jensen tasted tomato sauce and Jared’s flavor hidden underneath. He tickled the bumpy ridges along the top of his mouth, sliding against sharp teeth before finally tangling with Jared’s tongue, coaxing the limber muscle into his mouth like it was candy. He wrapped his arms tighter around Jared, hauling him in as close as possible. Jared widened his stance clumsily, lowering himself down and Jensen pulled away.
“Don’t,” he breathed, licking his lips.

Jared only looked confused and muddled.

Jensen placed his strong hands around Jared’s waist and urged him upright. “Don’t diminish yourself for anyone, especially me, sweetheart. You stand tall.”

Jared blushed and lowered his head, but Jensen wasn’t having any of it. He cuffed him lightly under his chin and raised himself up on the balls of his feet so that he almost met his omega eye to eye. “I love you the way you are,” he said lowly and pressed a gentler kiss to Jared’s lips than the ones from a minute before, internally rejoicing when Jared straightened in his embrace. “That’s my boy,” he murmured, dragging his lips along Jared’s jaw, lightly biting the strong line before nosing down his long neck to mouth at his collarbone.

“Jensen,” Jared moaned helplessly, hands running aimlessly up and down his spine. “Please,” he nearly whimpered when Jensen touched that subtle, erogenous zone.

Lost in the sensation, it took Jensen a second to regain his control. He knew what Jared wanted – what they both did. His mouth was so close to the fading mark he’d placed there the other night. But it still wasn’t right.

Smiling ruefully, he kissed the prominent bone and leaned back, shifting his head from side to side, trying to catch Jared’s kaleidoscope eyes. “Soon, sweetheart,” he promised. “Soon. Trust me.”

Jared wet his lips nervously, eyes glazed with desire and want. “I do,” he confessed. “I do, Jensen. Thank you for Jamie,” he rambled on, breathless and eager, hands finally resting against Jensen’s chest. Like he needed some distance between them. He’d been on the cusp of asking for what he’d wanted and when Jensen put him off, he was sure Jared felt obligated to offer up his gratitude as appeasement in case he’d offended the alpha.

Jensen cupped his cheek with one hand, unwilling to let go of his trim waist with the other. Brushing his thumb over that tempting mole by Jared’s nose, Jensen shook his head. “You got it all turned around, baby. I’m grateful to you for her.”

Jared opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, but couldn’t seem to say a word.

“I know,” Jensen smiled, “I know. It’s gonna take a while for you to understand that you were the one who gave me a priceless gift.” He rose on his toes and kissed Jared again. “But you’re a smart fella. You’ll figure it out eventually. And on that note,” he sighed, “I’m gonna hit the road. I’ve got an early appointment tomorrow I don’t want to miss.”

He watched Jared sink his teeth into his lower lip, but not voice the question that must have been on the tip of his tongue about what was so important on a Sunday when Jensen didn’t have to work. Jensen was more than willing to make up a story if he asked, but Jared stayed silent. Progress had been lost and that pained Jensen.

They walked hand in hand to the doorway, only breaking apart when Jensen bent over to put on his boots. As he was finishing tying the left one, he spotted Jared’s gaze fixed on his remaining tag. He smiled even as Jared’s eyes teared up.

“You didn’t have to do that,” he rasped. His voice was thick and clogged. Almost wringing his hands, he continued, “I mean…what you did for Jamie? For me? I-I can’t believe it.” He was winding himself up into a state with the reality of what Jensen had done finally sinking in.

Jensen straightened quickly and pulled Jared in. The omega tuck his head along Jensen’s neck,
breathing unsteadily. “I know you don’t,” he crooned into his ear, “but you will.”

They stood there for a minute, neither saying a word. Jared, whether he knew it or not, continued to scent Jensen and his heart slowly calmed in the process. When he finally lifted his head, he was flushed and shamefaced. “Sorry about that,” he sniffed.

Jensen tilted his head and thumbed away a tear. “Don’t apologize for that. It is a big deal. Hell, I’m still quaking in my boots over how important all this is.”

Jared rubbed at his runny nose and made a scoffing sound at the same time.

Jensen jostled him sharply with the arm he still had wrapped around his hips. “I’m serious,” he mock-scolded. “Our lives just changed and that’s huge. A good huge,” he added quickly when he saw a hint of anxiety start to cloud Jared’s expression. “A very good huge.”

Jared ducked his head a little and Jensen saw the echo of his daughter in the gesture, burying her face in her first store-bought bouquet of purple daisies. That endearing shyness was going to fucking kill his resolve not to just toss his plans aside and claim Jared there and then. Weaving his fingers around the back of Jared’s head, he nudged the omega close enough to rest their foreheads together. “What you make me feel,” he confessed, eyes closed. “I have got to go,” he finally added and the reluctance in his voice was not lost on Jared.

He stood tall and smoothed the front of Jensen’s shirt to give his fluttering hands something to do. “I understand. Just don’t stay gone too long.”

“I won’t, sweetheart,” he said quietly, studying Jared’s face closely, hoping the omega understood what he couldn’t tell him yet. Jensen was determined not to repeat Eric’s actions and dangle promises in front of Jared like a carrot that never materialized. When he did ask Jared what he planned to, everything would be ready. He wanted to make it as perfect as he could. He just hoped Jared truly understood. By the looks of his calm expression, Jensen was reassured he did. “I promise.”

With a last stroke along Jared’s sharp cheekbone, Jensen said, “G’night, sweetheart,” and moved away to pull on his jacket. If he didn’t go now, he would never leave. Jared leaned against the doorframe, just watching, as Jensen stepped out onto the front porch. The alpha winked as he buttoned his jacket and turned the collar up against the November chill. It smelled like snow.

“Goodnight, alpha,” Jared offered quietly and Jensen stumbled down the couple of stairs, his cock all but jumping to attention in his jeans. Blood had never rushed south that fast on him before. He whirled around and saw Jared still resting against the jamb, a partial silhouette framed in familiar light. “Thought I’d try out one of those ‘grown-up names’ like out daughter suggested. After all,” he lowered his voice with unintentional seductiveness, “I should have a special name for you, too.” With that, he smiled demurely and went inside, shutting the door softly behind him.

Jensen stood on the walkway, flabbergasted and aroused equally. Despite the hour and the darkness, he glanced around quickly before discreetly tugging at his suddenly uncomfortable jeans and walked stiffly back to his truck. It was going to be a bitch to drive with the massive erection he was sporting, but there was nothing he could possibly do about it now that wouldn’t get him arrested for public indecency. He squirmed miserably, but didn’t leave until he saw the living room lights doused and Jared’s bedroom light flicker on. Imagining Jared spread out on his large, lonely bed did nothing to help Jensen’s predicament. He banished those thoughts to the back of his mind, for when he had some time alone in his shower and could do something about them. He popped his truck into gear, swearing to himself about “best laid plans” and drove back to the apartment above the pub. He couldn’t bring himself to think of it as home anymore.
Jensen had been busier than he anticipated on Sunday, first with the appointment he had at Wicked Good Ink, which lasted a couple of hours, and then the shop he had discovered accidently a few doors down. Jared (ridiculously coincidental and highly appropriate at the same time) had done an excellent job making the adjustments he had asked for to his old tat, “removing” part of the phrase and adding the new words seamlessly with a clever design. Bandaged arm still stinging despite the Tylenol he had popped afterward, Jensen decided to walk around the historic Old Port district to check out the “competition” for lunch and came across a small jeweler that had something eye-catching in the shop window. A closer look later, Jensen realized it was exactly what he wanted without even knowing he’d been looking for it. When he walked out of the jewelers, not only did he have something for his Jared, but he’d found a pair of earrings with Jamie’s birthstone and they’d been able to convert them to clip-ons (no way was his daughter getting holes poked in her ears over something as foolish as jewelry) for her upcoming birthday. Jared had insisted the riding lessons, which she didn’t know about yet, would make a wonderful gift, but Jensen didn’t feel like those came from him; that had been all Sam as far as he was concerned.

Purchases safely locked up in his truck, he’d indulged in a Downeast Haddock Reuben at Miss Portland Diner. He loved sitting in Worcester Diner Car No. 818, avoiding the modernized expansion they’d added five years ago that didn’t have the same charm, watching the people walk by. As he munched on the fried haddock – open-faced on marble rye – and the reality of what he had done and would soon do sank in, he felt calmer than he had expected. Settled, he decided, was the best way to describe the pleasant hum coursing through his body. And not in a bad way. It was like all the pieces of his life had fallen into place and it was a neater picture than he had ever imagined. Despite the small box from d.cole jewelers all but burning a hole in his pocket, it wasn’t too hard for Jensen to call Jared and not spill his secrets. He’d waited this long. He could wait a little longer now that the end was in sight.

Heading north up the Turnpike, he talked about nothing in particular with the younger man, happy to simply hear his voice. In fact, Jared did most of the talking. Apparently, Jamie was in a tizzy about what to wear to school the following day. She wanted “the perfect outfit” to go with her dog tag and that required taking everything out of her closet and trying it on while Jared chaperoned. When she’d narrowed her choices down to three potential outfits, the “finalists” had to be ironed and then reevaluated. There was more production involved than when they’d decided on ‘kin’s makeup and accessories. Jamie’s “punishment” was all but forgotten and Jared admitted she was excited to tell her classmates how busy she would probably be for the foreseeable future with her daddy.

Jared’s voice had stuttered over the name at the same time that Jensen’s heart did that fluttery skip. He assured Jared his first stop tomorrow morning would be at the county clerk’s office to file the paperwork, but Jared had told him there was no need to hurry.

“Yeah, there is,” he had responded firmly. “I don’t want anyone to take this from me.”

Jared’s laugh was tinny in his earbud. “As if anyone could do that.”

Unbidden, flashes of that blond Stefan danced across his eyes. The single alpha parent who “got” Jared and whose son happened to be sweet on his daughter. But he didn’t say any of that aloud.

“As if I’d want anybody else,” Jared added breathlessly. “Only you, alpha.”

Jensen had to grip the steering wheel tight to keep from inadvertently jerking over onto the shoulder after hearing Jared call him that for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. “Shit,” he hissed, half under his breath.
“I should let you keep your mind on the drive,” Jared offered guilelessly. “I’m probably distracting you with my blather and you need to keep your eyes on the road.”

“I guess,” Jensen grudgingly admitted. It’s not like no one had ever referred to him as that before. He’d heard it more than once in the Navy as an honorific, slipping out with “sir”, and at other, less flattering times, too. But the deferential way that Jared whispered the word pushed buttons Jensen didn’t know he had. And, dammit, he was chubbing up again with no relief in sight. “You keep calling me that, sweetheart, and I’m gonna have to pull over and take matters into my own hands, if you know what I mean,” he growled.

“O-oh,” Jared stammered and Jensen heard the blush over the phone. He smirked, despite the throbbing between his legs, because he could affect Jared just as much in return. “I-I’m sorry.”

Tugging at his crotch and shifting in his seat, Jensen drawled, “Nothing to apologize for, darlin’. I’m just sorry I’m not with you right now.”

“Me, too,” Jared replied. “Jamie tired herself out with her impromptu fashion show and wanted me to tell you she loved you when you called. I do, too,” he added almost too softly to hear.

While the declaration did little to ease his erection, it tempered his desire into something mellower. “I love you, too, Jared. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he promised.

“‘Kay,” the omega mumbled, sounding exactly like Jamie, before disconnecting the call.

Jensen yanked the earbud out of his ear and tossed it onto the seat. Trying not to rub against his bandaged bicep (or other, throbbing parts of his anatomy), he turned up the radio. Thumbs tapping against the steering wheel to the 5:32 beat of “Enter Sandman”, he kept himself distracted from the ache between his legs and the itching along his arm with Metallica. It was an unsatisfying solution, but the best he could do under the circumstances. One step done, one step closer to the finish line. He spotted a Statie with his radar gun out on the side of the road, a speed trap for the southbound traffic. Jensen made sure to flash his headlights for the next half mile while singing along to the radio. He didn’t want this particular day ruined for anyone.

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The county clerk’s office wasn’t especially busy first thing Monday morning. That hadn’t stopped Jensen from arriving there a full thirty minutes ahead of time and waiting by the front door like he was camped out for Zeppelin tickets. A very bemused Amanda Tapping had unlocked the door for him promptly at 9:00 a.m. and peered around his shoulder, as though half-expecting a crowd of some sort, but found only him.

The alpha examined his paperwork closely, turning the page over and back again. Jensen shifted his gunmetal black Shoei helmet from hand to hand while she did. The morning was bright and clear and with few chances left to ride his motorcycle this season, Jensen had taken the Indian out for the day. He was actually tapping his booted foot against the checker-square linoleum like he had to piss before she finally congratulated him, pulling out her notary seal embosser and collection of stamps, making his claim on Jamie official. Jensen bought another dozen notarized copies despite Amanda’s assurances that he couldn’t possibly need that many. He politely disagreed, folding up the small sheaf of papers and tucking them in his jacket’s inner pocket.

“So there anything else I can do for you, Jensen?” the auburn-haired woman asked him.

Swallowing past his nerves, Jensen squared his shoulders, riding leathers creaking as he did. “There is one more form I think I need.” However, before he had a chance to say another word, Amanda
reached under her counter and pulled out a sheet of paper that she deftly slid across to Jensen.

“State of Maine Intentions of Marriage” was printed in bold at the top of the Department of Health and A/β/o Services form.

Jensen shot her a startled look. “How did you…” he trailed off.

The alpha raised a hand and delicately patted the back of her French twist. Jensen recognized the style since he had started to hunt down DIY YouTube videos showing how to do a French braid, because he thought Jamie’s hair would look pretty like that as it got longer. “I’ve seen the two of you together about town. Twenty years at this job,” she smirked, “and I’ve gotten good at more than navigating the waters of bureaucracy. I can spot a couple headed for marriage from a mile offshore. Just fill this out and come back with it, your intended and $40. I’ll be able to issue you your license on the spot. Then you’ll have ninety days to use it.”

Jensen carefully folded up the form and added it to his collection. “Thanks, Amanda.”

“Have a nice day, Jensen. And good luck,” she winked as he shouldered open the door, already pulling his helmet on. He gave her a “thumbs up” on his way out. One down, two more to go.

It didn’t take long before Jensen was banking the easy turn off New Meadow Road into the small parking lot for West Bath School, which handled kindergarten through 5th grade for the town. The one-story building, generic and nondescript, could have been any school. That was probably why when Jensen walked the hallway looking for the principal’s office, his mouth dried out. Some memories never faded and he couldn’t recall a single kid that ever skipped their way to that dreaded place. Booted heels echoing across a floor with the same tiles as the county clerk’s office, Jensen managed to find Principal Richings’ office easily enough. His assistant, a charming beta named Lindsey who sometimes dropped by the pub on the weekends, smiled serenely when he entered.

In a matter of minutes, Lindsey had faxed off Jensen’s claim on Jamie to the district school board and added a notarized copy to his daughter’s personal records on the premises. Returning to her desk, she explained, “I’ll add an electronic copy to her file as well. Principal Richings is a touch old-fashioned and prefers that,” she waved toward the impressive collection of wooden filing cabinets that dominated one wall of the office, “as our primary database.”

Jensen nodded sympathetically. Richings was a strange, old bird. For the most part, Jensen had only ever heard good things about the dour alpha, but after the incident involving his daughter, he’d been chomping at the bit to have a word with the man personally. Now that he was officially recognized as Jamie’s sire, he figured he’d have a leg to stand on. “I would love to have a sit-down with him to discuss school disciplinary practices sometime in the near future. Could you schedule a meeting with him for me?”

Lindsey tapped dutifully on her laptop. Richings might like antiquated systems, but his assistant clearly did not. “We’re kind of crazy around here right now with the upcoming Thanksgiving events, but I think I can get you in before we break for the winter holidays,” she said without raising her eyes from the glowing screen before her. She wrote down the pertinent information on a small appointment card and handed it over.

“Thanks,” Jensen nodded to her. He was zipping his jacket up when she got up suddenly and grabbed a bright pink flyer from a wide collection on the wall opposite the filing cabinets. “You might want to consider this as well,” she offered him helpfully.

Accepting the neon colored paper, Jensen studied it carefully. Emblazoned across the top was “A/βPTA”. 
“The Alpha/beta Parents - Teachers Association,” Lindsey elaborated. “Our chapter isn’t that big, but it’s a fairly dedicated bunch of parents.” It wasn’t lost on Jensen that there was no inclusion for omegas. “What with the election results and all going the way they did, several members are curious what changes might come down the pike when the President Elect takes office.”

“Funny, ‘curious’ is not the word I’d use. ‘Scared shitless’ seems more appropriate.” Folding the paper into sharp quarters, Jensen flashed her a shark’s smile. “I appreciate this. You can bet your ass I’ll be there. You’d be surprised how tenacious I can be about something I care about.”

The beta’s smile wavered a little, but she nodded to Jensen. “I’ll look forward to seeing you there.”

“Count on it,” he grinned, stepping into the hallway.

Classes must have just gotten out, he gathered, when children flooded the hallway in waves. Jensen felt like a salmon swimming upstream as he walked back toward the entrance while a pack of ankle biters headed for the cafeteria in the opposite direction. He got more than a few curious glances tossed his way and realized he probably looked pretty imposing in his black leathers. He’d almost made it to the double-doors when he heard a faint, “Daddy Jensen.”

Twisting around, he barely had time to bend down and catch Jamie when she launched herself into his arms. “I didn’t know you were coming here today,” she gasped, kissing him on his cheek.

“I had to drop off the paperwork to make everything official,” he told her quietly, setting her back on the ground. He didn’t want to make her late for lunch. He had no idea what kind of punishment that might merit for an omega, but he figured it would earn her something. “I wish I could stay, but I’ve got to hit the road.”

Her blue eyes got ridiculously wide then. She clutched his hand tight. “No, Daddy, please don’t hit it with your bike.” Jensen didn’t know if it was her worry that made her forget, but he kind of liked being called simply “Daddy”.

“It’s just a dumb expression, honey. It means I have to get going,” he replied, hoping to set her mind at ease.

“Oh,” she sighed, “that’s much better. I’ll see you at home,” she waved cheerfully, heading off in the same direction as the others.

A small group of older children had lingered nearby, watching them, and whispering amongst themselves. They were all alphas, he noted. When Jamie walked by, Jensen overheard the tallest one ask in a rather unbelieving voice, “The Terminator is your dad?”

Jamie shrugged her shoulders. Jensen was sure The Terminator was not a movie Jared would have let her watch with its senseless violence and blatant, alpha posturing. “That’s my daddy,” she said easily, turning to wave goodbye.

Sucking in his cheeks, Jensen decided a little intimidation might go a long way. He slowly put on his sunglasses with enough dominant alpha rolling off him that even a youngster could sense it.

“Anybody gives you a hard time,” he nodded to his daughter and paused for cinematic effect, “and I’ll be back.” With that, he pushed open the doors hard enough to make them slam against the walls outside. He strode deliberately over to his motorcycle, keeping his helmet hooked around his elbow, started up his bike and did a slow pass by the main doors. A couple of faces were pressed up against the glass, watching him in awe. He opened up the throttle and peeled out noisily onto the main road, spraying gravel behind him. When he was far enough away that they couldn’t see him, he pulled over immediately and fastened his helmet back on. He might have wanted to showboat a little, but he
didn’t have a death wish. And his ears were getting cold.

He debated about visiting Jared at the Hyde campus, concerned he might be interrupting something if he did. He found himself more acutely aware of how the old, military adage of “different spans for different ranks” played out in the civilian world to a much darker degree. Since it was lunchtime, however, he convinced himself it would be all right; they had to let Jared have time off to eat. The school was close enough that it would only take him five minutes to get there if he hopped onto Rt. 1.

In four and a half minutes, Jensen pulled off the highway and cruised along the meandering drive that wound around the campus, trying to figure out which multistory, red-brick building might house the cafeteria. He was about to pull into a spot and take his chances when he spotted Jared sitting on a bench outside. And he wasn’t alone. That blond alpha was with him. Jensen cut the motor abruptly and dismounted.

Walking along the path to the collection of curved benches, Jensen vaguely noted the compass pattern set in the concrete that the benches circled. But he only had eyes for his omega, who was involved in a serious discussion with the other teacher if his grim expression was anything to go by. Words drifted over to Jensen and he didn’t recognize them, although he did the language – French. The two men were having a private conversation in full view of anyone who might care to listen in simply by speaking a foreign language. Jensen probably would have thought it was beautiful if Jared had been saying those words to him, but he wasn’t. He was staring at Stefan with an earnest expression.

“Je ne sais pas,” Jared told him.

The blond alpha leaned closer and placed a hand on Jared’s shoulder. “Ça pourrait devenir mauvais. Réfléchis, ok?”

“Je sais,” Jared eventually replied, looking uncomfortable. He fiddled with the buttons of his denim jacket.

And Jensen trusted him. He really did. But seeing another alpha – especially that particular alpha – so close to his omega was jangling his nerves. He closed the remaining distance quickly, making no effort to mask his presence. “Hey,” he announced roughly. Both men turned their heads in his direction and a flitter of guilt passed across Jared’s face before he smiled sweetly.

“Jensen,” he exhaled, scrambling to stand up. Stefan did the same.

“I’ll leave you two to it,” the biology teacher offered lamely and Jensen was slightly mollified that the other alpha didn’t try to linger. The blond nodded curtly to Jensen and Jensen was happy to return the gesture. There were other gestures he was contemplating giving him, too, but decided they’d be inappropriate around children.

He was still glaring at the man’s retreating back when fingers hesitantly slipped over the hand not holding his helmet. He felt the coldness even through his leather gloves. “You’re freezing, sweetheart,” he remarked, attention drawn back to Jared in an instant.

Jared shrugged his shoulders, but couldn’t hide a shiver. “Come sit with me,” he suggested, jerking his head to the empty benches. “I’ve still got a little time before my next class and it’s nice out here.” And it still was, with the sky clear and the sunlight coldly brilliant. Jensen let Jared lead the way back to the chilly benches. He sat his helmet on the ground next to him and began to tug off his gloves. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but what brings you by?” he asked Jensen, leaning ever so slightly against the alpha’s broad shoulder. That settled his nerves even more.
Jensen handed over his gloves, giving Jared a pointed look at his curled fingers. The omega accepted them and couldn’t hide his pleased sigh after he worked his chilled hands into the warm leather, his bandage catching slightly in the process. “I wanted to see you. Sorry if I interrupted something important.” He hadn’t meant to sound snappish, but Jensen wasn’t sure he’d entirely succeeded judging by the way Jared’s eyes briefly flickered to the side.

“It wasn’t,” the omega assured him quickly. “Just discussing…politics,” he finally admitted. “It’s such a volatile subject right now and easier to do in French because not many around here are as fluent as we are.”

Jared didn’t meet his gaze and Jensen smelled more of that guilt he noted earlier. Jared was hiding something from him, but their current location was far from ideal to have a heart-to-heart about whatever it was. He decided to table his concerns for the moment. “Sounds like a smart idea,” was what he said instead, rolling out his lower lip and nodding thoughtfully. He curled his arm around Jared’s shoulders. Jared startled momentarily, but then sank into his side.

“Is this okay?” Jensen asked, not wanting to do something that would get Jared into trouble. He hated having to think twice about what he did these days and then reminded himself this was nothing compared to how Jared had to live his whole life.

“S’okay,” he hummed, tipping his head against Jensen’s.

“Better not let our daughter hear you talking so sloppily, Teach,” Jensen teased him.

Jared chuckled and smiled into Jensen’s hair. “I love hearing you call Jamie that,” he confessed quietly.

Digging around his jacket’s inner pocket, Jensen pulled out one of the notarized claim copies. “Better get used to it a lot more because it’s official,” he smirked and handed it off to Jared.

The omega stiffened and accepted the form with an uncertain hand. He furiously poured over the one page document, eyes darting back and forth, his left hand fisted against his mouth. Jensen didn’t miss the way that the paper shook in his grasp and kept a firm arm around him.

Slowly lowering his fist, Jared twisted around to stare directly at Jensen. “I-I can’t begin…” he stuttered, “you have no idea what this…” And the omega couldn’t finish a single sentence, but his ocean colored eyes said everything he couldn’t vocalize.

Cupping Jared’s face with his free hand, Jensen said, “I think I have an idea what it means to you. And I want this, Jared. I want her.” He paused and dragged a thumb along Jared’s mouth. “I want you.” He pressed a chaste kiss to the younger man’s cold, chapped lips, thinking it was perfect.

When they broke apart, Jared’s lower lip was trembling. A pair of students, judging by their uniforms, were walking nearby and stopped to stare.

Jensen stroked Jared’s smooth cheek with that same thumb and subtly jerked his head in the direction of the kids. “I-I can’t begin…” he stuttered, “you have no idea what this…” And the omega couldn’t finish a single sentence, but his ocean colored eyes said everything he couldn’t vocalize.

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Jensen stroked Jared’s smooth cheek with that same thumb and subtly jerked his head in the direction of the kids. “You better smile so that they don’t think I’m pickin’ on you or something. I’ve already been to the principal’s office once this morning. I don’t want to get sent to this one’s, too.”

They both chuckled and Jared smiled, dimples peeping out. He glanced at the boys and nodded to them. They immediately started whispering to each other and scurried off. Not wanting Jared to feel like he had to continually thank him, Jensen stood up, tugging Jared with him while he grabbed his helmet. “C’mon,” Jensen suggested, “let me walk you to your next class.”

Jared carefully tucked the precious paper into his messenger bag before hitching the leather satchel
over his shoulder. He accepted Jensen’s hand, winding his fingers between the alpha’s. It was clear he was still in a mild state of shock over the official claim, because it took him a good minute or so before he finally asked, “Wait. You were sent to the principal’s office?”

Jensen tossed back his head and laughed at the adorably befuddled expression on Jared’s face. “Jamie’s principal,” he explained, “to drop off the paperwork.”

Still beaming, Jared did give him a once over. “I’ll bet you made quite an impression.” There was no mistaking the whiff of arousal rising off of Jared and Jensen’s alpha puffed up.

Passing other students and teachers, many openly gawking at them, Jensen smiled smugly. “That was the idea, sweetheart. And they ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” he promised the omega.

Dropping Jared off at his building, he grudgingly accepted the return of his gloves. Rather than take a chance and cause a scandal, Jensen refrained from saying goodbye the way he wanted to when he left Jared outside his classroom. He settled for a wink and a promise to see Jared at home before his shift started at the pub. Walking along the hallway, Jensen peered into an open classroom and spotted the alpha biology teacher setting up a lab practical for his students. He was alone and Jensen was sorely tempted to go in and have a few words with Stefan. There was a strong need to mark his territory, but until he staked his claim, Jensen didn’t have the right. The other alpha lifted his head, sensing Jensen’s presence, and the two exchanged a drawn-out look before the teacher dipped his head down. Jensen let out a long breath through his nose, nostril flaring; it would do for now.

Swinging a leg over his bike, Jensen slipped his gloves back on. There was still a faint hint of Jared’s scent on the leather. Jensen briefly closed his eyes and tried not to picture his omega with the other alpha, but it was a hard image to ignore. Shaking his head to clear his mind, Jensen yanked his helmet on and started up his cycle. For whatever reason, Jared and the other alpha had been involved in a serious (intimate) conversation that had left his omega distressed. He hadn’t been joking when he told Lindsey he was tenacious. Jensen was going to get to the bottom of it, one way or the other.

Chapter End Notes

You can listen to Melody Gardot's "Worrisome Heart" here on YouTube.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

So...the "last" chapter is longer than I expected. Consider this part 2 of 3...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jensen was determined to discover whatever was going on, except he didn’t. It wasn’t for lack of trying. However, each time there was a chance to broach the subject, something interrupted them. And he had to admit he allowed himself to be distracted by some initial disappointment when he gave Jamie a copy of their claim during supper. To say she was less than enthusiastic about it was putting it mildly. Jensen’s disappointment, however, didn’t last for long.

“Should we frame it?” Jared suggested, sensing that Jensen expected more than her causal perusal of the government form.

“Okay,” she agreed easily and then continued telling her mother about her day at school. “Davy says he’s not going to Jake’s party because I can’t go. He’s the best,” she sighed, smiling with dimples in full force.

“How nice,” Jensen grit out. He kept his feelings about certain blond alphas and their fathers to himself as he stabbed at his dinner.

“Maybe,” she turned her cerulean eyes up to Jensen, “we could take him out on your boat?”

For a second, Jensen tried to picture them together with the two additional alphas on the All In, but the only thing he could see in his mind’s eye was the blonds eyeing his omegas. Jensen gripped his fork tight enough that his knuckles whitened. “Don’t think so,” he said lowly. When Jamie appeared sad, he quickly added, “Remember, I told you I don’t take folks out during the winter months. The weather’s too unpredictable out on the water and I don’t like to risk it. I won’t even take you or your mother right now.” It was a sound reason, but utter bullshit in this particular instance.

She nodded glumly. “I guess. I just want to do something for him because he’s my friend.”

“And this is a good friend and we’ll think of something appropriate to say thanks,” Jared promised her. “When we frame this,” he added, clearly trying to steer her back to the document “would you like to hang it up in your room?”

She shrugged. “Sure.” She chased tater tots around the plate with her fork.

Jensen’s shoulders sagged. He didn’t envision his claim on her coming second place to deep-fried potatoes. And not even homemade ones at that.

“Aren’t you excited about this?” Jared finally asked her pointblank.

Jamie wiped her hands on a paper towel and pulled the paper closer. “It is pretty.” She traced her finger around the gold seal affixed to the lower left side. “I like the stickers,” she smiled sweetly at Jensen. “And this is like the stuff one of the auntie mommies back in Texas used to read from.”

Jensen watched as she brushed a fingertip against the embossed seal Amanda had punched into the
“Braille?” Jensen wondered, turning to Jared.

“Yeah,” he admitted, dropping his gaze. “We all helped her learn to read that way after she lost her sight.” The omega didn’t elaborate further and Jensen’s stomach turned. He didn’t need to hear what happened; his imagination was sufficient. “So,” Jared – a master of redirection – continued brightly, tapping a long finger on the claim form, “this is very important. This makes Jensen your daddy.” Jensen watched her expectantly.

Jamie lifted her head and gave her mother and then Jensen a confused look. “No, it doesn’t. You wanting to be my daddy makes you my daddy,” she explained, patting Jensen’s hand with her little fingers. “A piece of paper can’t do that.” She looked at them both like they were idiots and the unspoken “duh” hung in the air accusingly. Jensen let out a laugh and Jared chuckled.

“So pragmatic,” her mother replied.

“Huh?” Jamie scratched at her nose, curls framing her pixie face.

“It means you’re sensible,” Jensen explained, still shaking his head over her answer.

Jamie raised both her hands up. “Well, duh. Grown-ups make things so hard sometimes.” And she went back to her tot wrangling. There was no point in disagreeing with her, Jensen realized, because she was right. Obviously, the forms were a societal requirement, but she knew their bond transcended government paperwork. And, once again, she saw it before anyone else did. He had the smartest daughter in the whole world.

They spent the rest of the time listening to Jamie recount the striking impression Jensen had made at her school, with Jared sharing some of the remarks he had received after the alpha’s visit to his and before he had a chance to talk to Jared, it was time to get back to the pub. Their parting was quick and unsatisfying in many ways, leaving Jensen longing for more from Jared. Judging by the way his omega clung to him in the doorway, Jensen wasn’t alone in those desires.

That night, Kim had all but squealed his ears off when she found out about his claiming Jamie.

“You’re a fuckin’ dad,” she grinned, slugging him on his shoulder.

“Well,” he blushed, rubbing his arm because Kim hit hard, “I’m a dad, at any rate.” He hung up his jacket, too lazy to go upstairs with it, and rolled up his sleeves out of habit. The corner of his bandage peeked through and the other alpha’s sharp eyes didn’t miss it.

“What did you go and do, Jensen Ross Ackles?” She sounded less like his commanding officer and more like a mother in that instant.

Making sure no one was paying them any mind, which was pretty easy on a Monday evening, Jensen peeled back an edge, letting her see the changes that Wicked Good Ink had wrought. Kim didn’t need any help with the translation. She looked hard at Jensen and then snapped her head once. She went over to the glass cabinet they had at the front of the bar, unlocked it and pulled out the sole bottle of 26-year-old Glenfiddich Excellence they had. It retailed for over five hundred dollars.

She grabbed a pair of thistle glasses that she kept for the high-end scotches and placed it all between them. When she went to crack the seal and pull the cork out, Jensen laid a hand over hers. “You were saving that,” he said softly, “for when the omega got into office and changed the world.” Kim had been holding onto that amber filled bottle for several years, waiting for the election to turn out like she had expected and dreamed.
She bit the inside of her cheeks. “Yup, I was. But guess what? You just changed the world, doll.”

Jensen cocked his head, not understanding.

She sliced her thumbnail through the dark blue seal and worked the cork out of the single malt whiskey. Pouring a shot in each of the slightly tulip-shaped glasses, she set the bottle aside and brought the glass close to her nose and appreciated the aroma. “And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world,” she quoted. “That’s from the Talmud and that’s exactly what you did today.” She held the glass high, saluting him, and then drank the oak barrel aged scotch.

Jensen returned the gesture, sniffing the amber liquid. There were hints of green there, like violets and sweet peas opening in springtime. The taste was a mix of brown sugar and oak flavor that built up with hints of spice underneath.

“Ooh, looky here,” an annoying voice broke in. “Are we having a tasting night?”

Jensen’s eyes fluttered shut and he exhaled loudly through his nose. He didn’t need to see Kim’s shoulders bunch up to recognize Ben’s irritating tone. Turning around, Jensen stared at the other alpha, who swaggered over to a stool with Callum drafting in his wake. Since November 9th, the pair had returned to the pub every night like conquering heroes.

Folding his arms across the bar, Ben leaned forward, indolent and smug. “So how would you describe it? Fruity? Smokey?”

“Is this a closed event or can anyone get in on the action?” Callum chirped, brushing a hand against his graying goatee and practically licking his lips.

Kim held up the bottle. “It’s thirty bucks a shot. You’re welcome to join us.” When the two glanced away and fidgeted, Kim slapped the cork back in the bottle. “Didn’t think so.”

“Just you wait,” Callum replied. “Once the Alpha is in, he’s going to pour money back into the military where it belongs. Bath Iron Works is going to be begging us to come back. They’ll be throwin’ money at us.” He turned and bumped fists with Ben.

“You got that right, brother. Hell,” Ben expounded, “he’ll probably open up Brunswick again.” Ben turned to regard Jensen seriously. “It will be like the BRAC campaign never happened. I bet they’ll even offer you your old position back.” Flicking his eyes briefly over Kim, Ben sneered, “Probably not you, though.”

Kim tensed up, but Jensen stepped in front of her. “And where’s all the money for this magic gonna come from? You?”

Ben huffed, but didn’t back down completely. Glaring Jensen with his beady, blue eyes, he insisted, “He’s gonna make it happen. Mark my words. The Alpha’s gonna make a lot of changes and put things to right.”

“And when he does,” Callum joined in, backing up his buddy, “I’ll buy a round of that fancy scotch,” he nodded to the bottle of Glenfiddich, “for us all.”

“When Hell freezes over,” Kim mumbled to Jensen, locking up the bottle. “It’ll be here waiting for you,” she said more loudly, giving the pair of alphas a pointed look while she twisted the key.

“Mark my words,” Callum replied.
“Oh, I remember everything that comes out of your mouth,” Kim promised him. Placing a hand on Jensen’s shoulder, she said, “I’m out of here.” And, quieter, she added, “I’m so happy for you, doll.”

Jensen placed his hand over hers, squeezing it briefly. “Thanks.”

Ben and Callum had the good sense to remain quiet until Kim left. Then their bragging returned, growing wilder throughout the night in their absurd notions. They swapped theories between them on how much better life was certain to be once “the Alpha” was in charge. How this country was in desperate need of a real leader. The election had emboldened them and every single day, they seemed to push the envelope of polite conversation. Jensen slung a towel over his shoulder and sighed. It was going to be a long night. He scanned the bar and only Steven, Doc Beaver’s alpha, was in residence. The dark-skinned man seemed lost in the swirls of his bourbon and it dawned on Jensen that he hadn’t seen Jim since the election.

“What did you do this time?” he joked, topping up Steven’s drink unasked.

Steven smiled up at him, but the expression didn’t match what was in his deep, brown eyes. “We’re just not on an even keel right now,” he jokingly replied. It didn’t take much for Jensen to put two and two together. Both he and Jim were from here and true Downeasters – they did not share their personal politics in public. But it boggled his mind that either of these two men would have voted for anyone other than the omega. Clearly, one of them had. Granted, it was possible it hadn’t been the alpha they’d cast their vote for. There were a couple of fringe candidates for the “Center Party” that eschewed association with either the Democrats or the Republicans. And Jensen was the first to respect that as a U.S. citizen, a person could vote for whoever they damn well pleased. But from a tactical perspective, he believed anyone who had cast a vote for that fringe party had not only thrown their vote away in the last election, they had helped elect the alpha Republican. Watching the way Steven gripped his drink, Jensen wondered how much more damage this election was going to wreak before people started coming together again. There was already too much “us vs. them” as it was.

Callum banged his glass against the bar and Jensen groaned, reaching for the bottle of Jägermeister. Pouring each of the alphas another shot, he tried to drown out their talk about the “Alpha’s” promise to embrace traditional values and a “return to the natural order”. Scrubbing furiously at a spot on the glossy wood that wasn’t there, Jensen wondered how much worse the week could get. In retrospect, he had no idea.

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Despite his best efforts to talk to Jared, something was always coming up that prevented Jensen from getting to the bottom of what was between his omega and the other alpha. He nearly lost his temper for the first time when he came over on Friday and Jared was deep in a conversation in French on his cellphone. There was no mistaking who he was talking to. Jensen busied himself in the kitchen, finishing up the meal Jared had been preparing before he’d gotten distracted by his call (which he continued outside without a jacket on in the November chill). Jensen angrily chopped up carrots and onions for the stew Jared had cooking, the smell of rosemary bread filling the room while he worked.

When Jared finally returned, closing the back door quietly behind him, Jensen was ready to pounce. Unfortunately, Jamie came skipping in, eager to tell Jensen about an idea she had. His discussion with Jared was tabled once again when he slipped out of the kitchen as their daughter waylaid him.

“Daddy Jensen, is it okay if Davy comes riding with me?” she asked, eager-faced and earnest. “He didn’t go to Jake’s party for me.”

He and Jared had given her the good news about the lessons with Sam yesterday and she had been
beside herself with excitement ever since. His grip tightened on the Henckels knife (somehow his most useful cooking implements were slowly meandering their way to Jared’s kitchen), but he tempered his frustration because it was Jamie.

Twisting around to look down at his daughter, Jensen smiled. “Honey, Sam said you could invite anyone to come with you. I thought,” he added, not above a little manipulation, “that maybe you might want your mommy to learn with you.” He was no saint and if Jensen could guilt her into excluding the young alpha (and, by association, his father), so much the better.

Jamie brushed aside her bangs. “I did ask Mommy first. But he said he wanted to be able to take pictures of me the whole time instead.” She leaned against the cabinets and rolled her eyes. For a second, Jensen saw the young woman she would grow into superimposed over her tiny figure, willowy limbs and soft curls like her mother, lovingly exasperated over her doting parents. His breath caught at how clear that image was and he was shaken that her childhood could (and would) disappear that quickly.

Chef’s knife poised above a bunch of freshly washed celery, Jensen swallowed loudly. “You invite whoever you want. It was a gift for you,” he reminded himself in the process of reassuring her. “Real gifts don’t come with strings attached.”

Jamie balanced on tiptoes and puckered up. Jensen set the wickedly sharp knife on the cutting board and leaned down obligingly.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she whispered in his ear after giving him a messy kiss on the cheek. “I can’t wait to tell him. Tomorrow can’t get here fast enough,” she moaned dramatically.

“You mean Monday,” Jensen corrected her easily, resuming his chopping, “when you’re back in school together.”

“No, tomorrow,” she murmured, watching intently at the rapid-fire way Jensen dispatched the celery. “’Cause of the party.”

The rhythmic snap of steel through ruffage stopped abruptly. “The party you’re not going to?” he asked, pivoting around to face her.

Jamie, who had been dragging her finger along the edge of the sink, looked up at Jensen and there was no mistaking the startled expression there. “Oh. Uhm. Yeah. The party I can’t go to.” She dropped her eyes and shuffled one foot along the linoleum floor – the perfect picture of guilt.

Trying to contain his frustration, Jensen said conversationally, “So, you’re going to see Davy tomorrow?”

Not meeting his eyes, Jamie bobbed her head up and down. “And is his daddy going to be there, too?”

Another nod.

Great, Jensen fumed to himself, just great.

Jamie must have sensed his annoyance, because she lifted worried eyes up to him, tugging on the fingers of one hand with the other. “Daddy Jensen,” she began.

“How’s dinner coming?” Jared said, breezing into the room like nothing was amiss.

Jensen turned and narrowed his eyes, trying to sense what was happening here. He didn’t get very
far. Kim’s irritating ringtone – “Muskrat Love” – interrupted them all. Jensen held up a finger, because Kim never called him when he was off unless there was an emergency. He pressed the home button and held the phone to his ear.

“What’s up, Kim? Are you okay?” he asked, staring right at Jared while he spoke.

“Jensen, I hate to ask, but can you come in now?”

“Sure thing. What happened?”

“I’m cleaning up a bit of a mess and Brianna just arrested Brock.”

“What the hell happened?” Jared’s face blanched at his question.

“I’ll tell you when you get here, all right? Everything is as okay as it’s going to be for now,” she replied and there was no missing the tense anger in her voice. “Drive carefully.”

“On my way,” he promised and disconnected the call. He shoved the phone in his back pocket and quickly wiped his hands on a dishtowel, the half-finished celery forgotten. “I’ve gotta head out,” he said brusquely to the pair of omegas eyeing him warily.

“Is Kim all right?” Jared fretted.

Jensen closed his eyes and packed away his exasperation – worry over Kim and whatever Jared was up to – because there was currently nothing he could do about either. When he opened them, he offered his omegas a small, heartfelt smile. “Kim is fine,” and he didn’t miss how Jared and Jamie simultaneously sighed in relief. “There was a little problem at the bar and she needs my help cleaning it up.”

“Be careful, Daddy,” Jamie told him, not entirely calmed down.

He kneeled in front of her and gave her a firm hug. “Always, honey. You help your mommy finish making dinner, okay?”

“I will,” she promised him.

“I wish I could go with you,” Jared whispered when Jensen pulled him in for a quick hug.

“No,” Jensen replied immediately. Despite the unease that lingered over whatever Jared might be doing with the other alpha, his protective instincts overwhelmed everything else. “You stay here with Jamie and stay safe.” He didn’t want Jared anywhere near whatever had happened. “I’ll text you later when I get a handle on what’s going on,” he vowed to Jared.

“Please,” Jared nodded eagerly, already worrying his lower lip.

Jensen brushed a strand of Jared’s hair behind his ear, but he was distracted as his mind raced over the millions of possibilities that ended with Brock in jail and he pulled away. “Either way, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he murmured, buttoning up his jacket. It was his weekend on and his family always stopped by on both days to visit for a while. It wasn’t until he was almost to the pub that he realized Jared hadn’t agreed.

Angrily slamming the truck door shut, he stormed into the bar. Scanning the place, he noticed a stool was listing and DJ was mopping up the floor near a booth. The place wasn’t too full yet, with only a couple of patrons, including his two, least favorite alphas. Jensen was suddenly sure that they were somehow involved in whatever had happened, given the furtive way they were huddled together and
talking. Kim was pacing restlessly along the wooden length of the bar, clearly on edge. She only paused her frantic walking when she spotted Jensen.

“Hey, you,” Jensen said, hurrying over. “What the hell happened?” He flicked his eyes over to their cook, who was almost finished mopping up what smelled like spilled beer.

Some of the tension drained from Kim’s frame when she spotted him, but she still held herself rigidly as Jensen moved around to her side of the bar. She shook her head and wiped a hand across her nose and mouth, glancing once at the alphas at the end of the bar. “They happened,” she hissed quietly.

“Then why are they still here?” Jensen grumbled as he shucked off his jacket and tossed it down by the register.

Kim pursed her lips tightly and turned away from them. “Because free speech, even if it’s shitty and hateful, is still protected in this country.”

Side-eyeing the alphas, Jensen placed both his hands on Kim’s shoulders, grounding her. “From the beginning?” he asked.

Exhaling loudly, Kim composed herself. “To be honest, I can’t say exactly what happened, which is why those fuckin’ knotheads are still here and Brock isn’t. I was helping DJ with their order in the kitchen, mostly to avoid having to deal with ’em, when I heard the fight break out.” She paused and closed her eyes briefly. “Not like it’s our first one here, but we’ve been so lucky, you know?”

And Jensen did; they hardly had any fights since opening the pub and it was a point of pride for them both that they usually got things diffused before they escalated to violence of any kind. He nodded, not wanting to interrupt her now that she was talking.

“I ran out, with DJ on my heels, and there was Brock, swinging away at both Callum and Ben. And they were clever, Jensen, because neither one of them raised a hand against him.” She lowered her voice further, drawing him closer. “I’d stake my life on the fact that they baited him just to get a rise out of him. And Ben,” she paused, sneering over the name, “made a big show of falling off his stool and spilling his beer everywhere, claiming he hurt his elbow and shoulder in the process. I had to call the cops,” she practically spat. “Since it was still early, there wasn’t anyone else here who saw what really happened…”

“And it boiled down to the word of a beta against two alphas,” Jensen finished for her grimly.

“Brianna had to take him in,” she admitted, “even though it tore her up to do it. You just know Brock’s alpha is gonna rip him a new one over this and they’re already on the outs with each other over his relationship with Colin.”

She leaned against the bar and let her head sink between her shoulders. “Doll, I am so very sorry to call you in early, but if I stay here one more minute and listen to their bullshit, I’m going to end up taking a swing at them myself. And we both know I don’t count as a ‘real’ alpha.”

“Go on and head home. Bri’s gonna need you when she gets there, too. This couldn’t have been easy for her, either” he urged her, gently nudging her toward the bar flap. “I gotcha covered.” He hated how defeated she sounded.

She smiled gratefully, ducking under the bar instead of opening the flap, like she didn’t even have the strength to do that. “Thanks,” she murmured, snagging her coat and bag. “Have a good weekend,” she added, clapping DJ on the back when he rolled the mop and bucket past her into the utility washroom.
Jensen grabbed a rag simply to have something to do with his hands. He pulled out his phone and sent Jared a text to set the omega’s mind at ease. But he needed more time to collect himself for a call so that he’d be calm when he did. It was still too early for the rest of the regular, Friday crowd to meander in and he dreaded having to tell and retell the secondhand story of Brock’s arrest tonight. Until then, it was just him and the two knotheads.

“You boys about finished tonight?” he asked stiffly, making a show of reaching for their empties.

“Not even started yet,” Callum replied, slow and sly with a hint of that accent that Jensen could never pin down.

“Seems like you’ve already done enough for one night,” he shot back, eyes staring pointedly toward the area DJ had cleaned.

“That wasn’t our fault,” Ben explained, leaning close as though he and Jensen were sharing confidences like old friends. “Callum and me were just talking politics,” he offered reasonably, “and exercising our First Amendment rights of free speech. This is America, you know.”

“That wasn’t our fault a special snowflake couldn’t take the heat,” Callum smirked, “and had a meltdown.”

“He’s gonna have to learn to control that temper. He was almost as bad as an omega acting out like that and you know that shit isn’t gonna be tolerated for much longer,” Ben added, smirking when he saw Jensen’s jaw tighten. Shaking his head, Ben rolled out his lower lip. “I don’t know how you put up with it. Must be some kinda payout there somewhere, huh?” He waggled his eyebrows. “At least, that’s what history teaches us about them. I don’t have any first-hand experience with omegas myself. Care to share? Your experiences, I mean.”

Jensen’s grin grew toothy. “Let me make one thing crystal clear. I am a big believer in the First Amendment. Don’t get me wrong,” he continued, when the other two exchanged knowing nods like they had him over a barrel, “I hate those Westboro Baptist fucks who dishonor military funerals, anyone’s funeral, with a passion. And kids, who have never risked a single thing or shed blood for this country, burning our flag over some perceived injustice against them? Our flag, which is the last thing a dead soldier’s body is covered with to honor their sacrifice? It makes me want to puke. Someone who won’t stand during the national anthem?” Jensen shook his head. “I ain’t got no respect for that shit. But what I do respect – what I risked life and limb to protect – is their right to peacefully protest and speak out against this country like that. This country respects their right to protest peacefully.” He tapped a finger against the bar for emphasis. “Just because I don’t like it doesn’t mean they don’t have a right to do it.”

Several regulars had drifted in by this time, grabbing their usual spots. But no one ordered anything, too keen on watching what was unfolding in front of them.

Jensen took a breath and when he continued, his voice was pure gravel. “But this place ain’t just America. This place is mine and Kim’s. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again so there’s no misunderstanding. We don’t tolerate disrespectful speech. I catch anyone crossing that line and, trust me, you won’t like what happens.” His smile was downright predatory now.

Ben pushed forward, the alpha in him rising to challenge the alpha in Jensen. Jensen’s green-fire stare never wavered and eventually the other alpha leaned back slightly, admitting defeat with body language alone. The only sound in the whole place was the stark clank of dishes from the kitchen.

“We done here?” Jensen asked, hands on their glasses.

“For now,” Ben murmured. There was no mistaking the venom in his words. “For now.” The burly
alpha reached for his wallet, but Jensen stopped him with a hand on his wrist.

“On the house,” he smirked. “I know how rough it’s been for you boys.”

Callum glowered at him icily. The fact that they had to scrounge around for odd jobs was no secret. But paying their way was always a source of pride for them. Jensen couldn’t have hit them any lower than by offering them charity.

Jensen met their scowls head on. “Trust me, it’s the very least I can do.” No one missed the implied threat that he could do much, much more. A small part of Jensen realized that this might come back to bite him in the ass, but he couldn’t help himself.

Ben stood up to his full height, taller than anyone else in the place. He regarded Jensen for a long moment before the corner of his lip quirked up. “I’ll find a way to pay you back, Jensen.” He buttoned up his oilskin coat, motions slow and deliberate. “You can count on it. C’mon, Callum.”

“We can swing by the packie on the way to Don’s place,” Jensen heard Callum mumble to Ben on their way out.

That’s all they need, Jensen thought. More booze.

The rest of the night was a blur as Jensen filled and refilled drinks, hearing the story of Brock’s arrest passed around like a bad game of Telephone. And he couldn’t help but dwell on how much worse it could have been if it had been Jared instead of Brock. The beta would probably walk with no more than a fine by the time Judge Rolston dealt with it all on Monday, not even a mark on his record to show for it. But if it had been Jared – an unmated, adult omega? If they could prove it wasn’t in self-defense, which wouldn’t take much, he’d get a mandatory sentence of two to five years minimum and would lose all rights to Jamie permanently. Suddenly doing it right between him and Jared didn’t seem nearly as important as doing it as soon as possible.

The next morning, Jensen called Jared but only got his voicemail. By the time he had gotten a free moment the night before, it had been too late to phone, so he’d shot off another text, reassuring Jared that things were all right and he’d explain more when they spoke. Apparently, it was going to be a while before they talked, since Jared was inexplicably incommunicado.

Probably with Stefan, his mind offered unhelpfully.

He spent the morning (worrying what Jared was up to) making arrangements with The White Barn Inn in Kennebunk for next weekend. He booked their Loon Cottage, which was the only one they had with two bedrooms, two separate entrances and two bathrooms. He figured maybe he could convince Jamie that having her own room would be extra special. They were even able to arrange a Justice of the Peace, who Jensen could get in touch with during the week to work out the type of vows he might want, and the restored barn was available for both a brief ceremony and candlelit meal on Saturday night.

Hands only slightly shaking by the time he was finished, Jensen, dressed in a Zeppelin t-shirt and faded jeans, headed downstairs to help DJ set up for the lunch crowd. The trusty beta was already in the kitchen, a little earlier than usual. Unfortunately, the dependable cook was staring mournfully at a huge pile of salt on the kitchen floor.

“Didn’t hear about snow in the forecast for this morning,” Jensen laughed easily as DJ scrambled to get a broom.

“Oh, Jensen. I had a small oopsie,” he confessed breathlessly, startled at being caught out.
“I can see that,” Jensen grinned, crossing his arms and leaning against the doorway. “That’s what you get for trying to lug around a bag bigger ‘n you, pal. Need some help?”

“I got this, but…”

“But what?”

“There’s not enough time to go to Sam’s Club and get another bag before we open, and I can’t cook without salt.”

“Want me to run down to O’Hara’s and pick up a few, smaller bags?” Jensen offered. “I was going to help you with the food prep anyway.”

DJ gave him a shaky grin. “Would you? That would be super-duper.”

Jensen shook his head, laughing silently. The beta had the oddest phrases, like some old soul trapped in a young, skinny body. “Sure thing. You got this?” he asked, eyebrow cocked in good-natured amusement.

Waving him off, DJ replied, “Yeah, I don’t think I can make more of a mess than I already did.”

Jensen ducked out of the kitchen and jogged back upstairs. He slathered on some lotion over his healing tattoo before slipping on a plaid overshirt and then his pea coat. It was fairly cold and he flipped up his collar and debated about a scarf, but ultimately passed on that. O’Hara’s General Store was only a ten-minute walk, but he covered the distance in five thanks to the nip in the air.

The green and gold sign hanging out front, stating the store had been established in 1858, creaked back and forth in the chilly breeze. Opening the door, the familiar jingle of the old bells announced his arrival. There was only a single customer in the store, which wasn’t unusual on a wintry, Saturday morning, browsing the Vermont cheeses. Jensen gave him a polite nod, ducking down the staples aisle. He was momentarily confused, because although he spotted flour, cornstarch and sugar, there was no salt in sight. Checking twice, he went back to the front counter and, when he didn’t see Jenny anywhere, rang the bell.

Jenny O’Hara ambled out from somewhere around back after a minute. The beta, easily over 70, moved like a much younger woman. Her family had owned the place since it first opened and although she’d taken a break when she married and raised her children, Jenny had come back to the job about ten years ago when her husband passed. “Jensen,” she grinned, army-green eyes twinkling in delight. “What brings you here this fine morning? If I’d’ve known someone as handsome as you were going to darken my door today, I would have done something with my hair.” She patted her short locks, dyed a lovely shade of red.

“Don’t let Mr. DeTurk hear you say things like that; his feelings might get hurt,” Jensen teased her, tossing his head in the direction of the cheeses.

Jenny peered around his shoulder and then waved her hand dismissively. “Thomas hasn’t heard a word in twenty years at least. He’s certainly not going to start now. Isn’t that right, Thomas?” she shouted the last part, but Mr. DeTurk was either spellbound by the sharp cheddars or he was as hard of hearing as Jenny claimed he was, because he gave no sign of noticing them.

She smirked. “See? Now what can I do for you, hun?”

“Jenny, either I’m going senile or you’re out of salt and I am in dire need of some this morning,” he explained.
“Are we?” she asked, sounding shocked. “Let’s just go take a look.”

In front of the empty slot, she giggled. “Guess your noggin’s still intact. I’ll bring you some from the back. How much do you need?”

Jensen gave her a rough estimate and she nodded. “You wait for me by the register and I’ll be back in two shakes,” she winked, walking away.

Her “two shakes” were decidedly not fast and twenty minutes – plus two politely declined offers of help from him – later, Jenny slowly returned to the counter carrying Jensen’s order.

“Darn things were behind a couple of boxes of Christmas decorations. How they ended up there, I’ll never know.” She shrugged her shoulders and rang up his order.

Jensen thanked her and carried the box as quickly as he could back to The Pitch & Roll, because he’d been gone over half an hour and even though it was DJ’s accident that was behind it, he still felt guilty about leaving the cook holding the bag. Jenny had never been that slow before and he vaguely worried if she was starting to develop Alzheimer’s or if it was simply normal forgetfulness. He hoped Mr. DeTurk had better luck than he did if he needed help with something.

“Sorry,” Jensen called out, balancing the box of salt bags one-handed while he wrestled the keys out of the front door. “But I got ya covered.” Walking into the kitchen, he was surprised to see a new bag of salt near the food prep area.

“What the hell?” he exhaled.

“Oh, Jensen, darnedest thing. When I went to find the dustpan, I saw we had another bag of salt back there.” He had the good sense to appear guilty. “Sorry about that.”

Handing off the box to the cook, Jensen shook his head. “No biggie. But I’m starting to wonder about Jenny and maybe you, too.”

“What do you mean?” DJ called back from the dry goods storage.

Hanging up his coat in the kitchen near the beta’s, Jensen replied, “She had a hell of a time finding the salt, because they were out in front. She must’ve rummaged around for almost half an hour trying to find more.”

“Huh,” DJ remarked, washing his hands before handling the food. Jensen couldn’t help but notice he’d finished all the prep already. “Probably having a bad day like me.”

“Well,” Jensen slapped him on the back, “let’s hope it only gets better.”

DJ smiled, wide and sincere. “I’m sure it will.”

Jensen returned the smile and made sure the bar snacks and drink garnishes were fresh and ready, before opening.

The day’s business was kind of slow and Jensen wondered if Brock’s arrest (Kim had texted him that Brianna hadn’t even held him overnight, instead turning him over to his alpha’s custody almost immediately) had soured the town. It wouldn’t surprise him if it had. And the fact that Jared remained radio-silent continued to rankle him. To top it off, even though there was hardly any traffic, DJ sporadically needed his help in the kitchen for the most mundane things, which was highly unusual. Seemed like their bad luck was going to hold steady throughout the day. And there was still no word from Jared.
Around 4:00 p.m., after DJ had asked for help for the third time that afternoon with something in the pantry, Jensen was close to losing it. He was about to let the beta have it, when his phone rang. It was Kim.

“You okay?” was the first thing out of Jensen’s mouth. He was still unsettled over last night.

“Doll, I’m fine,” she assured him immediately. “But I have a favor to ask you. I was so turned around yesterday, I think I left a window open in the back room. I was airing the place out for that party booked for next week. Could you put my mind at ease and save me a trip out there by checking right now? The forecast calls for icy rain tonight and all we need is water damage on top of everything else lately, you know?”

“Yeah, if DJ can hold the fort without me for two minutes,” Jensen grumbled, stomping out of the kitchen, “which I’m seriously starting to have my doubts over.”

“I’ll just hang on while you check,” Kim went on, ignoring Jensen’s attitude.

Jensen walked down the hallway in back, past the restrooms, to the single room at the end of the building. When he and Kim renovated the place, they debated about simply leaving it as extra storage, but it had nice light and was removed enough from the main space that they decided it would offer a modicum of privacy from the regular foot traffic. They made it a “private” dining room that people could reserve for parties and events.

“I didn’t know we had a party booked for next week,” he said, at once worried it might conflict with his surprise plans for Jared and him if Kim ended up needing an extra hand for it.

He opened the door and reached for the light. “We don’t,” Kim replied.

“Surprise!” a bunch of people cried in unison when the room lit up.

Jensen blinked stupidly at the sight before him. And blinked again.

Most of his friends, Kim included, were clapping and standing under a banner that read “It’s a Girl!” in glittery, purple script. Pink and purple balloons bobbed around the room and music was playing softly. But the only thing he really focused on was his family standing front and center. Jared was dressed in a white-button down and his darkest jeans, showing off his long and lean legs, while Jamie had on jeans and a purple t-shirt that had “Daddy’s Girl” emblazoned across the front.

His crooked smile, slow to start, split his face and he knew he had those “crinkles”, as Kim liked to call them, creasing the skin around his eyes. “Hey, guys,” he said, feeling stupidly happy.

“We tricked you, Daddy,” Jamie squealed and ran to wrap her arms around his waist. He held her close, taking in everything before him. She tipped her head back and said, “I almost goofed yesterday, but you didn’t figure it out, did you? About the party?”

“Honey,” he told her honestly, “I had no idea this was what you meant.”

She rolled her forehead against Jensen’s abdomen, smothering her giggles against him while Jensen’s friends, one by one, came over to shake his hand or slap his back and offer their congratulations. Even DJ peeked in. “And you thought I was an idiot,” he grinned, “having one catastrophe after another.”

“I have to say, pal, I wondered what the he-heck,” he tripped over the word, not wanting to swear in
front of Jamie, “was wrong with you.”

“Had to keep you distracted for the decorating. And when everyone started showing up. Oh,” he tacked on, “Jenny isn’t going senile, either.”

“She was in on it?” Jensen was surprised she’d been involved, but relieved to hear the older beta was as sharp as ever.

“She was happy to help out,” Kim replied. DJ shook his hand and went back out front. “Call me if you need a hand,” Kim yelled after him. “Don’t think he will since most everyone is here. And it isn’t as if he’s an incompetent, after all,” she winked.

“Coulda fooled me today,” Jensen huffed, laughing at how he’d been bamboozled.

Jensen perched on the edge of one of the smaller tables that ringed the room. There was one in each corner, with what looked like games and craft projects spread out on them. The large, rectangular banquet table that could easily sit twenty had been moved to the center, acting as a buffet, covered in platters of various foods and desserts. There were plates of fried bay scallops and whole belly clams, lobster rolls, chicken tenders, burgers, a huge tureen of chowder and bacon dusted fries. And one end of the table was completely covered in fresh pies. There was enough food to fill a mess hall. It was a good thing his friends were here to finish it all off. But he only had eyes for one of them.

Jensen was itching to touch Jared, but the omega was sticking close to his daughter. And Jensen understood that; he really did. It was a huge step for Jared to be in a room of alphas and betas where he only knew two or three of them. Obviously, he wasn’t comfortable letting Jamie out of arm’s reach. And right next to Jamie was Davy. The little, blond alpha only had adoring eyes for his daughter and hung on every word she said. Jensen covered his mouth and chuckled, wondering if that was how he looked at Jared – like a lovesick puppy. Probably. But Davy wasn’t alone. His father, not knowing any of the people at the party, hung around near Jared. It made perfect sense, but Jensen’s blood boiled anyway.

“Pretty nice, huh?” Kim asked, sidling up to him. She offered him a plate with an assortment of food, which he accepted and set down next to him.

“It’s really great. Thanks for doing this,” he told her.

“Nuh uh. This was all Jared,” she corrected him, brushing her newly colored (and very pink) hair out of her eyes.

Jensen twisted slightly to face her. “Seriously?” It wasn’t that Jensen didn’t believe that Jared was a thoughtful individual, but he was understandably reticent around crowds of strangers.

“Yup,” she nodded, pausing to wink at Brianna, who was caught up in something Jamie was telling her. “He called me up Tuesday morning and asked if he could rent the room and throw a small shower for you. And before you ask,” she held a hand up to keep him quiet, “no, I did not charge him for this.” She smacked him on his arm like she was affronted he would even think that and he hissed, because his tat was still tender.

“But,” she continued slyly, “I might have gone in on this with him, because something tells me he never got a shower when he was expecting. This is for him a little bit, too.”

Despite the sting in his arm, he slung it around her shoulder and pulled her in close. “Thanks,” he whispered in her ear.

“Pfft, all I did was help with the food and the guest list. And maybe a few of the party games,” she
winked evilly at him. “Speaking of which,” she stood up and clapped her hands.

“And now everyone’s had a chance to stuff their faces,” she said loudly, “time for some fun and games.”

Jamie bounced where she stood, holding onto Davy’s hand. Jared watched fondly, cutting his eyes every once in a while over to Jensen, shy and strangely bashful. He wondered if Jared was worried that he didn’t appreciate the party or if calling attention to his claim on Jamie was something Jensen had wanted to keep private. Because of the distance between them, he hoped his smile conveyed what he couldn’t say, which was that he had never been happier.

“I’m kinda new to the whole shower thing, although I hope to get better with practice,” Kim announced, shooting her girlfriend a quick glance.

Did Brianna just blush? Jensen pondered. That was something worth pursuing later.

“I believe,” Kim carried on undaunted, “that a traditional game is guessing the size of the mother’s tummy. Now, Jared’s made that too easy with those Levi’s he’s wearing,” referring to the tan tag in back, “so let’s make it more interesting.” She pulled down one of the balloons and motioned for Jared to come closer. He looked around nervously, but Jamie slapped her hands on his backside and started to push him forward.

“You gotta, Mommy,” she huffed and everyone laughed.

Reluctantly, Jared stood next to Kim and slowly tugged his shirt free. The quick flash of toned stomach had Jensen’s mind drifting back to that evening they’d spent together. He knew exactly how those muscles quivered and fluttered right before Jared came. And he had to nip those thoughts in the bud because he was fairly certain an erection at a shower was not appropriate behavior. But then, Jared stuffed the balloon under his shirt, the material stretching taut, and the omega cupped the fake bump almost instinctively. If Jensen had been turned on by the brief glimpse of flesh before, it was nothing compared to what he felt watching Jared appear swollen with child. He unconsciously licked his lips, picturing that it was his baby nestled safely in there. Jensen scrambled to adjust his jeans, which were growing snugger in the crotch by the second. But seeing Jared like that stirred something deep inside him. Something hungry.

To almost everyone’s delight, it was Jeff who guessed Jared’s fake belly almost to the millimeter. The gruff alpha blushingly explained he’d spent enough years recovering car seats that he’d gotten good at estimating how much material a job would take. His blush deepened when his prize was a sparkly, pink crown he had to wear for the duration of the party.

He tried to pawn it off on Jamie, but she patted him on the arm and refused. “You won fair and square,” she told him. “And you look so pretty with it.”

“That you do,” Samantha teased him, but Jensen didn’t miss the way her smile softened his scowl. The tiara stayed put.

“Oh, Ms. Ferris. Thank you very much for the present,” Jamie offered solemnly, hand thrust out. Jensen’s smile widened, seeing how polite and fearless his daughter was around people.

Sam leaned down and shook Jamie’s hand. “My pleasure, little lady.”

“And this is Davy,” Jamie rambled on, grabbing the boy by the crook of his elbow and yanking him closer. “He’s wicked excited about the horses. Right, Davy?” The boy bobbed his head obligingly.

And Jensen wanted to be angry, but seeing how excited Jamie was over it, he couldn’t begrudge his
daughter her friend’s company. After all, the young alpha had stood up for her. His mellowing acceptance did not extend to the boy’s father, however.

Now that Kim had distracted the others with the “onesie” (Jamie and Jensen-sized t-shirts) decorating table and the (unbelievable) “bobbing for nipples” bucket, Jared had drifted into the background, where, Jensen suspected, he felt safer. Almost unwillingly, Jensen tore his gaze away from his omega and spotted Stefan staring at him as well. But the other alpha seemed more thoughtful than lustful, which wasn’t exactly what Jensen had been expecting. Then, the blond alpha slowly faced Jensen and started toward him.

“Congratulations,” he offered, holding out his hand. Not wanting to be a total dick, Jensen accepted the handshake. If he gripped the other man’s hand a little tighter than decorum dictated, however, no one else was the wiser.

Subtly shaking his hand out once Jensen let go, Stephen smiled despite his discomfort. “Big thing you’ve gone and done, adopting Jamie.” Jensen nodded, not sure how much polite conversation he was expected to make with the alpha. The man jerked his chin toward his son. “I can’t think of a more important job in the world than being his father.” Jensen nodded along, his hard stance showing the first signs of thawing, because he’d started to grasp how precious a task raising a child was. The blond cocked his head to one side. “Except, obviously, having a mate.” And the walls slammed right back into place at those words.

“You know I work with Jared,” Stefan began, but Jensen cut him off.

“Shop teacher, right? And what was it?” he paused, snapping his fingers. “Dart coach?”

The other man rolled his shoulders back, but didn’t completely rise to the bait. “Biology teacher and archery, actually.”

“Close enough,” Jensen laughed, false and loud.

The other alpha was undaunted. “Jared and I have spent a lot of time together these last, few months.”

Not in the same way we have, Jensen grumbled to himself.

“And I like to think of myself as his friend,” he continued, unaware of Jensen’s internal musings. “At least, I hope I am.” And the man’s blue eyes grew wistful. Jensen wasn’t sure what to make of that, like the other alpha was unsure of his footing with Jared. “As his friend, I think he’s making a mistake,” Stephen continued, taking in the room, before zeroing in on Jensen, “about a lot of things. And I’ve told him as much.”

Jensen’s hackles rose and he bristled at the unspoken insult that he was somehow not good enough for Jared.

“But his mind is made up and I have to respect that. So,” he drew in a long breath before letting it out and leaning in close, “as his friend, it is my duty to tell you that if you ever hurt him, I will make you very, very sorry. And if you slip up, I’ll be right there to pick up the pieces.”

Jensen straightened up so that they were eye to eye, before he replied, “You know, the first thing they teach you in scuba diving is to not hold your breath. That applies to so much in life. I’d take that lesson to heart if I were you, pal.” He clapped Stephen on his shoulder and, to his credit, the other alpha only jerked slightly from the force of it.

Naturally, this was the moment when Jared finally came over, perhaps mistakenly thinking he and
Stephen were getting along.

“Hey there,” Jared exhaled, moving to stand beside Jensen. He lowered his head, but peeked through his bangs and asked nervously, “You like your party?”

Jensen’s smile became warm and genuine. “I love it, Jared” he said, clasping the younger man’s hand and twinning their fingers together. He wanted to do more than that, but he knew Jared was reticent about too much PDA. And Jensen didn’t want to do more simply to mark his territory, either; he respected his omega too much. “I totally did not see this coming.”

Jared, the tip of his tongue peeking out from between his teeth, ducked his head further. “Jamie was worried sick last night that she’d let the cat out of the bag.”

He gave their linked hands a small tug, hoping Jared would take the hint. Jared shuffled closer until his hip was almost pressed up against Jensen’s. “Nah,” he continued. “I figured you all had a playdate or something.”

Jared was oblivious to the emphasis Jensen placed on the last word. “That’s what I told her, but she wasn’t convinced until you turned on the light.”

“Thanks for inviting us,” Stephen inserted himself into the conversation. “You know how much we love spending time together.”

“Jamie wouldn’t have had it any other way,” Jared assured him. “She adores him.”

Jensen didn’t think the alpha had meant just the kids, but he kept his mouth shut. Whether he liked it or not, Stephen was Jared’s friend and his son was their daughter’s best friend. They were going to stay in his family’s life for the foreseeable future, therefore he needed to accept that as gracefully as possible. And Davy had stood up for Jamie when no one else did.

“Your son is a good boy; somebody you raised right. And I couldn’t ask for our daughter to have a better friend than that,” Jensen said without hesitation.

“Thanks,” Stephen said slowly, seeming to weigh Jensen’s words carefully and finding them sincere.

But Jensen could give a rat’s ass what the other alpha thought. It was the dazzling smile, dimples and all, which Jared gave him that made his concession completely worth it. He squeezed the omega’s hand in return.

“Look at them,” Jared said softly, tipping his head close to Jensen’s and pointing at the two children with his free hand.

Davy was putting on a t-shirt at Jamie’s direction that they had clearly decorated together. There were two stick figures on the front, one with wildly curly squiggles on its head, and Jensen guessed they were meant to be holding hands. On the bottom, in none other than purple glitter, were the words “Friends Forever” with a ridiculous amount of exclamation points after. Whatever his daughter was saying to the blond boy, he was nodding his head hard enough that Jensen thought it might shake loose.

Glancing at his watch, the other alpha said, with some reluctance, “I guess it’s about time for us to go. By the time Davy winds down after all this it will be his bedtime.” He shook Jensen’s hand a second time. “Congratulations again. You’ve got a beautiful family.” His blue eyes flicked over to Jared instead of Jamie when he said that.

“I do,” Jensen agreed. “Thanks for coming and bringing your son.”
Stephen nodded curtly and went over to collect his child. Davy seemed as reluctant to leave as his father was. Jensen only felt bad for one of them, though.

“Well,” Kim sighed, “as much fun as this place is, I think we’re going to head home, too.”

Jared let go of Jensen’s hand and went over to the back of the room. He seemed to be rummaging around for something on the floor that Jensen couldn’t see.

“I’ll take care of the cleanup, Kim,” Jensen promised his partner, kissing her on the cheek.

“Meh. If there’s any food left, which I don’t think there is, wrap it up and leave the rest. Nobody’s got this place booked until Christmas. We can deal with it next week.” She returned his kiss with one of her own. “I’m so happy for you, doll.”

Brianna joined them and Kim held out her arm. “There’s my champion nipple bobber,” she teased. “Must be all the practicing you do.” The blonde alpha blushed, dimples appearing around her mischievous smile.

“Hey, babe. We headin’ out?” the deputy asked.

“I think it’s time,” Kim agreed.

“Wait for me!” Jamie called out, running to catch up to the women while Jared tried to adjust her backpack as she did.

The two alphas broke apart, each one holding out a hand to the little omega. “We couldn’t leave without you,” Kim told her.

“Bye, Daddy,” she said to Jensen, puckering up.

A little confused about where she was going, Jensen nevertheless bent down and obliged his daughter with a kiss. “Thanks for my party, angel. I’ve never seen so much pink and purple in one place before.”

“Isn’t it awesome?” she agreed. “Like Auntie Kim’s hair.”

“You like it, huh?” Kim asked, flipping a few strands with her free hand.

“Uh huh,” Jamie agreed as the two women began to lead her away.

“How about we do something like this to yours? Purple maybe?”

The little omega’s eyes grew round. “Really?” she breathed.

“Nothing that can’t be washed out in time for school on Monday,” Jared called after them.

Kim looked back over her shoulder and flashed him a “thumbs up” and a wink before the three left.

“I think the rest of us,” Jeff said in his rumbling drawl, as he moseyed over with Sam, “are going to carry on the festivities in the main room with some proper refreshments.”

“My pretty princess has spoken,” Sam teased. He reached up and tilted his crown forward for emphasis and everyone laughed. The rest of the partygoers apparently decided that was an awesome idea and made for the bar, too, leaving Jensen alone with Jared.

Perplexed by Jamie’s departure, Jensen asked, “Where did our daughter go?”
Chewing on his lower lip, Jared shrugged. “Her first sleepover.” But Jensen couldn’t tell from his tone if it was an answer or a question.

“Seriously?” Jared trusted precious few in his life and this was Jamie they were talking about.

He huffed, but there were nerves in the sound. “Kim’s your best friend. You trust her with your life. If you trust her, then I trust her.” His voice grew stronger the more he spoke. “And Brianna’s a deputy. I can’t think of two people better equipped to watch out for her than them.”

Jensen nodded along in complete agreement, warmed that Jared would accept Kim like that. “Okay, but why tonight?”

Jared suddenly became intensely curious about the patterns in the wooden floor beneath his feet. “Because I might have a sleepover planned, too.”

“Huh?” Jensen wondered. He seemed to be one step behind everyone today.

“Yeah. I don’t have a bag or anything myself, but I figured you could loan me a clean shirt in the morning, right?” And he peered at Jensen through his bangs, lashes fluttering anxiously.

“You’re going to stay here with me all night?” For some reason, Jensen couldn’t wrap his brain around what Jared was telling him.

“That was the plan,” Jared replied. “C’mon. Don’t you have work to do, alpha?” Despite the rosy blush heating his face, the omega struck a cocky pose and sauntered out of the room to join the rest of the folks at the bar.

Jensen couldn’t tear his eyes off the way Jared’s indigo denim clung to his rounded, enticing backside as he left. He gripped the doorframe and slowly banged his head against the jamb. There was another seven hours until closing. He had absolutely no idea how he was going to make it through the evening.

“Maybe I can close early,” he croaked to the empty room and hurried to catch up to his omega.

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter to go. Really. Only one more.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

The second half of this chapter once again gets the full NC-17 rating. There is brief mentions of future mpreg and a smidgen of self-lubrication, but only in passing.

This really is the very last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The good mood from the shower carried on throughout the evening like an incoming tide. Despite his earlier protests, once Jeff realized that Sam found his tiara kind of adorable, he milked it for all it was worth and flinched away if anyone tried to steal it. Even Jared joined them at the bar, pleasantly surprising Jensen. He’d half expected (and, honestly, the possessive part of him would have preferred) his omega to have secreted himself away in a booth, but Jared bravely sat toward the far end of the bar, a part of the group and not at the same time. It was a courageous move for him and Jensen was proud.

After serving several customers various heaping piles of fried clams and fries, it dawned on Jensen that he had not seen Jared eat a single bite during the party. It wasn’t really surprising since the alpha noticed Jared skipped meals whenever he was stressed or nervous, but Jensen needed to rectify that. He stuck his head through the hatch to the kitchen and asked DJ to make up a plate for him. When Jensen later plopped the dish – heavy with roast beef slices and potatoes – in front of his omega, Jared had started to protest. Jensen stepped out from behind the bar and slid up next to him. Gently brushing aside some wayward strands of hair, Jensen leaned down and practically pressed his lips against Jared’s ear when he whispered, “You better eat, because you’re gonna need all your strength for what I have in mind tonight.”

Jared smiled nervously, scratching at the side of his head as he took a quick peek around the bar to see if anyone else had caught what Jensen had said. It was just like him to worry. But Jensen couldn’t hide a pleased smirk when his omega pulled the plate closer and dug in. “Smart boy,” the alpha murmured as he returned to his station.

The evening, already good, grew brighter when Steven and Doc Beaver came in together. Granted, Misha – shaking off freezing rain from a rainbow scarf – was practically dragging them both behind, but it was something. The beta directed both men to sit down at a small table by the front end of the bar and took the stool between them. Misha rooted around in a large, canvas bag and pulled out a hank of fluffy yarn. The beta untwisted it, demanded that Steven hold out his hands and then looped the yarn around them. Misha immediately started to form a ball from it, directing Steven how fast to let out the yarn. When it was the size of a golf ball, Misha handed it off to Doc Beaver.

“Keep going,” the beta told the doctor and then pulled out a half-finished sweater in a completely different color and started to knit, leaving them to it.

While filling their drink orders (even though no one had a free hand between them), Jensen caught snippets of the conversation.
“Not so tight,” Misha admonished Jim, “you’re putting too much tension on it. The yarn will lose its ability to stretch and flex if you’re too demanding with it.

“And you,” the beta continued, swiveling around to face Steven when the alpha had sniggered, “stop and start like a car backfiring. You’re not consistent. That’s no way to work with your partner.”

Turning around before anyone saw his expression, Jensen wondered how long it would take the couple to figure out Misha’s ball of yarn was simply a metaphor for their relationship? He walked away, wiping his hands and shaking his head, grinning from ear to ear. Leave it to the sly beta to get them talking again, even if it was more grunting than actual words being exchanged at the moment. It was a start and that’s what counted. Over the happy rumble of customers, Jensen swore he clearly heard the smug click of Misha’s number ten knitting needles as he worked.

Refilling empties at a steady rate, Jensen told himself the evening would fly by at that rate and he and Jared would be alone soon enough. He could hardly wait. And yet, despite the hours still ahead, he couldn’t deny the night was a pretty decent one, all things considered. That was, until a certain pair of alphas ambled in. Jensen leaned beside the row of taps, arms crossed, and watched them coldly. But Callum and Ben sat at one of the smaller tables, like the one where Misha was working his matchmaking, that they put out on the weekends to accommodate the larger crowds. Not quite a booth, but at least they weren’t hanging out at the bar itself. Jensen shoved his bar rag in his back pocket and went over to take their order.

Both men were shaking off their coats, spattered with what looked more like ice than rain, when Jensen placed his hands against the waist-high table. “What’ll it be, boys?”

“Whatever’s cheapest on tap tonight,” Callum replied, handing his coat to Ben, who went to hang them up along the wall near the restrooms. “And some of them Bangs Island mussels,” he added after glancing at the specials chalked on the blackboard behind the bar.

“Two Doubleclips and a basket of muscles to go with your double IPAs,” Jensen nodded, but waited until Ben returned. “You boys gonna behave?”

Ben pursed his lips, poking his tongue into the side of his cheek as he sat down. His broad forehead folded up in wrinkles. “You made it perfectly clear, alpha. We know how to play by the rules,” he chuckled, but there was no joy to the sound.

And how to skirt right up to the edge, Jensen thought, but what he said was, “Then we’re all good here.”

He paused on his way back behind the bar, laying a hand briefly on the small of Jared’s back. “Can I get you anything else, sweetheart?” he asked quietly enough that no one else heard.

Jared peered up from his nearly empty plate, flushed pink from good food and caught out having practically inhaled his meal. “Maybe,” he paused, wiping bangs from his eyes, “a club soda?”

Jensen chuckled as he collected Jared’s dirty dishes. “I think I can manage that.”

Jared smiled and then jerked slightly. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his phone, hand shaking slightly. Jensen hovered beside him, knowing he was worried about Jamie. Jared thumbed open the device and flipped through a message quickly, smile growing with every swipe. “Proof of life,” he chuckled and leaned closer to Jensen so that he could see the phone better.

“Looks like they’re havin’ a ball,” Jensen grinned, scanning the half dozen photos Kim sent. Jaimie’s beaming face shined up at them as more of her hair gradually turned purple in each one.
“Looks like they’ve set up camp in the living room,” Jensen pointed out to Jared, indicating the couches pushed aside in the background.

“And there’s more to come,” Jared agreed, tapping the array of nail polishes lined up in the foreground on the phone’s screen.

Jensen lifted the hand holding the dishes and jerked his head toward the kitchen. Jared nodded and went back to staring at his phone. Walking into the back, Jensen missed the assessing glare Ben trained on Jared.

When Jensen returned, he placed the drink by Jared’s side. The omega poked at the lemon twist that bobbed around in the bubbles. “Fancy,” he grinned.

“Only the best for you,” Jensen winked before making another pass down the nearly full bar, checking on drinks and food orders.

“Can you turn that up?” Sam asked him when he neared, jerking her chin at the television. Jensen obliged by grabbing the remote and thumbing the volume up.

“...BBC America,” the announcer droned on, suddenly audible, “is proud to show an encore performance of its award-winning documentary ‘From Alpha to omega: the history of omega rights in America’, narrated by Dame Judi Dench.”

Jensen cut his eyes toward Jared. The younger man sat stiffly, but gave Jensen the barest of nods, so Jensen left the show on. DJ called Jensen into the kitchen to spell him for a quick break before he closed out the kitchen for the night and he reluctantly obliged. Jensen poked at the steel baskets sitting in the deep fryer dejectedly, listening to the documentary rattle off the decades of indignities omegas suffered in the “new world”.

“And while Great Britain was in the process of not only the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act of 1807,” Ms. Dench’s distinctive voice explained, “and addressing in Parliament the first of many Acts of reformation to bestow common rights and dignities to omegas as well, America continued to keep its omega citizens collared and upheld the barbaric practice of making those going through their biannual heats available for public use by leaving them chained in yards and even public squares for any alpha to take advantage of their compromised condition.” A series of daguerreotypes flashed on the screen, later replaced by grainy photos all showing the same theme – nearly nude men and women in heavy collars. Some were chained to fences and others in stocks for ready use by the public.

Jensen winced, not wanting to hear about the dark history this country was a part of. He wanted to turn the damn television off, but maybe that was Sam’s whole point. Too many of them had already turned their back on what their forefathers had done like that could make it go away. Like being a child, closing their eyes and covering their ears hoping it would all vanish. Maybe it was time to honestly face the mistakes of the past to keep them from being repeated ad infinitum. He was so tangled in his thoughts that he didn’t even hear DJ’s return, startling when the beta placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I think you better check on Jared,” he said softly and Jensen was out of the kitchen in a heartbeat. What he saw twisted his gut, remembering Ben’s promise to pay Jensen back. He hadn’t been too worried initially, knowing he could take whatever the alphas could dish out, and had basically dismissed them. Jensen hadn’t thought far enough out, however, because the only way to really hurt Jensen was through his family. And the two had apparently figured that out.

Callum and Ben had abandoned their table and flanked Jared at the bar during his absence. At first
glance, they seemed to merely be talking to each other, slouching forward to speak around Jared and pass the basket of bivalves back and forth. But as Jensen got closer, he realized they were talking about the documentary, adding their own, personal opinions to the historic way that omegas had been treated. Jensen’s jaw clenched as they skirted right up to the rules he had made very clear the other day.

“I wonder if they’ll talk about how omegas had to kneel next to their alphas whenever in public. And eat from our hands. When did that get taken away from us?” Callum asked Ben.

“In the ‘50s maybe?” the other alpha replied, picking at the mussels. “Hard to keep track,” he mumbled around a mouthful of fried food, “of how much we’ve lost.”

“In 1938 as part of President Roosevelt’s New Deal package,” Jared said, voice not much more than a whisper. “It was part of the ‘3Rs’.”

“Three what? Reading, writing and arithmetic?” Ben wondered, head propped up on his bent arm, leaning way into Jared’s personal space.

“‘Relief, Recovery, and Reform’,” Jared continued, voice slightly stronger. “He slipped in changes to omega rights under the relief portions of his legislation. With so many alphas unemployed and practically destitute, he argued that they no longer had the ability to properly care for omegas and omegas needed to be given the opportunity to care for themselves. It was the beginning for us in this country.”

Before the conversation could go any further, Jensen jumped in. “If you’re tired,” he began, not wanting to appear that he was ordering Jared to do anything, but desperate to get him away from those two after what had happened with Brock, “you can go upstairs and wait for me there.”

Three pairs of eyes turned to regard him with varying emotions. “I’m fine right here,” Jared told him after a very long minute. His voice belied the tension he was feeling, but Jensen had to admire his fortitude even if he wanted to spare him the discomfort.

“Hey,” Ben added, almost falling across the bar in sloppy, indolent fashion, “we’re just talkin’ about history here, alpha. Facts. No crime in that.” The challenge in his tone was unmistakable, despite the false honorific, as Ben laid his head on his outstretched arm. It took everything in Jensen not to grab him by the collar and drag him across the bar to show him who truly was the alpha here.

“He’s right,” Jared hastily added and Jensen picked up the faint perfume of blossoms, calming him almost immediately. “We’re so much more than that now. We’re not slaves to our biology any longer. Let them talk. It’s only words.”

“It’s only words,” Callum parroted snidely. “Just a couple of guys sharing a beer. Or,” he coughed into his hand, “whatever girlie drink that is.”

Someone tapped their glass nearby to signal the alpha, and Jensen was torn between telling everybody to get the hell out and letting Jared fight his own battle. He was kicking himself that he hadn’t had a chance to warn Jared exactly what these two were capable of. However, Jared gave him a subtle nod and Jensen grudgingly went to see what the customer wanted.

“It’s shameful,” Sam muttered while Jensen used his bar gun to top off someone else’s soda. “The way we treat fellow beings on this planet.” Her gaze was riveted on the television, while Jeff nodded along. The older alpha slowly slid his arm around her waist. Jensen kept looking over his shoulder, not liking the way that Callum and Ben were closing ranks on Jared, inching closer and closer to him, leaking alpha pheromones to add to the physical discomfort of their proximity. The bar was too
loud, the clinking of glasses deafening when he was trying to listen in on what they were saying.

“Crap,” Jim muttered, followed by the startling crash of his stool and then a glass breaking. Most everyone turned to face the beta, who was blushing and trying to right the chair, pick up the larger pieces of glass and keep ahold of his ball of yarn all at the same time. Jensen rushed over, hoping that the doc and his alpha weren’t about to get into it, afraid that all of Misha’s efforts had been in vain.

However, when he got close, although he usually refrained, he scented the air. Jim was decidedly not angry, nor was Steven. The beta was flustered and sad and missing his mate. Jensen’s best guess was that he had inadvertently knocked over his stool trying to scoot it closer to Steven’s and the beer had followed.

“I got it, Jensen,” the other alpha rumbled in his deep voice. Jensen readily acquiesced as Steven helped Jim right his stool and got him seated again. And Jensen didn’t think anyone else noticed that Steven had made sure it was closer to his than it had been before. Despite his nerves, Jensen smiled and caught Misha doing the same. He turned his attention to the small puddle of beer and broken glass. He was able to scoop up the majority of the liquid and glass with his rag in only a few moments. Not like it was the first time that had happened in the pub, after all.

When he stood up, his bundled-up bar rag nearly followed his heart, which felt like it had hit the floor in a sick thud. Jared’s spot was empty and so was Ben’s. Callum was twisted around on his stool, staring at the hallway that led to the restrooms and the private dining room beyond. Jensen could only imagine what kind of shit Ben was desperate to pull and how he had waited until Jared had left the relative safety of the group to try it. He started to move almost blindly and practically ran into Jared, who was coming out of the hallway with his jacket folded over his arm.

Jared was stony-faced and rigid, face pale in the dim lighting. But he gave Jensen a forced smile and moved past the alpha to retake his stool, jacket draped across his lap. Ben appeared a few seconds later, equally upset expression on his face, a mixture of anger and disappointment. Whatever he had tried to pull, Jared hadn’t risen to the bait. With surprising uncertainty, Jensen stepped back behind the bar and watched the three of them. There was much he wanted to do, but slowly came to the realization that, as a father and (hopefully) a spouse, he had to tread carefully and keep everyone safe.

Ben shook his head at Callum’s questioning look. “Should have figured he’d pussy out,” the older alpha muttered at that.

Ben snorted knowingly into his beer. “Typical.”

“Jared,” Jensen demanded, “are you…”

The omega lifted his head and sat up. “Not my first rodeo,” he replied softly. It was hard to tell who amongst them was more surprised by his words.

“What?” Jared smiled shrewdly at Ben. “You think you’re the first alpha to try something like that?” he chuckled and traced a finger around the rim of his half-finished soda, not meeting Ben’s blue-eyed stare. “Since I presented and people could scent what I was,” and Jensen was certain the entire bar had quieted down, “I’ve been looked at and treated like less of a person and more like a hole to fuck or fuck over by more than I care to remember.”

A muscle twitched uncontrollably in Jensen’s jaw. He didn’t like to hear anyone to speak disparagingly about his mate, even Jared himself.

“You boys are hardly the first to see if you could set me off. Kind of amateurs, really,” Jared
continued, lifting his drink and then casting a strange glance at Callum. Setting it back down and sliding it toward Jensen, he asked, “Could I have another one, please?”

Jensen growled, snatching it away and tossing the whole thing into the garbage. He didn’t smell anything odd, but he wasn’t willing to chance it. Callum spitting in it would be more than enough to never want to use the glass again.

“...decades and decades of having their biology used against them as an excuse to justify barbarous laws designed to keep them subservient to the ruling class...” Dame Judi Dench continued on the screen, mostly forgotten. “Many speculate that omegas were a visible reminder of the primitive residing within all of us and they were despised for the mirror they held up.”

He placed a new glass in front of Jared, fingers brushing against the omega’s as he did so. Jensen’s grip on the bar gun was tight enough that he might have cracked the plastic when he refilled it. He didn’t care.

Jared accepted the fresh drink, swallowing almost half of it in one pass. Licking his moistened lips, he carried on in a stronger voice, “It must really tear you up,” he turned to face Ben and then swiveled around to include Callum, “that even with all your decades of alpha privilege, I’m the only one between the three of us with a steady job.” A pin dropping could have been heard in the pub at that moment.

Callum twitched his arm, but Jensen slammed a hand down and nailed it to the bar. “You so much as touch him and you’ll be out before you hit the floor.” His voice was flat, deadly and final.

The alpha’s upper lip quivered, but he yanked his hand free. “I was just reaching for the mussels,” he sneered, subtly shaking his wrist out beside him. Jensen shoved the basket over, spilling a few pieces in the process.

“You get all the breaks,” Ben grumbled, “for now.”

“Yeah,” Jared snorted. “That must be it. All the allowances made for us.”

“Try and deny you get government vouchers for places to live even if you have a job, while working stiffs like me and Callum don’t qualify for jack shit. Excuse me if I’m tired of paying your way for you and giving you a free ride. You don’t get to have it both ways: either you’re a special, protected class or you’re just like everybody else.” Callum nodded throughout it all. And Jensen knew that that right there was what had tipped many middleclass workers into voting for the alpha Republican. They were worn out from seeing their tax money go to entitlement programs that they couldn’t qualify for even though their own life was a genuine struggle. But Jensen also suspected many of them truly didn’t know how much worse others had it. Sure, there was always someone scamming free shit and abusing the system, but they were few and far between the folks who were nearly destitute with children to care for that their sires had turned their back on. They needed assistance because everything was stacked against them.

Jared bobbed his head up and down, sucking his upper lip into his mouth before slowly releasing it. “Section 8 housing,” he agreed and Ben raised his eyebrows knowingly.

“Exactly,” Callum agreed.

“Where,” Jared continued, tipping his glass onto its edge and rolling it back and forth along the bar, the sound almost deafening in the otherwise silent pub, “ten omegas with at least one child apiece are shoved into an apartment with facilities for two adults. Where, on the first of every month, the landlord would lie and say the government payment was late and he expected some kind of
reparation from us directly beyond our portion of the inflated rent or we’d find ourselves on the streets with our ‘brats’ to make room for ‘good, decent, paying folk’. Where,” he took another swallow as though to fortify himself for what he was about to say and Jensen couldn’t stop from placing his hand over Jared’s other one comforting, “on the first of every month, one of us would have to get down on our knees and let him use our mouth. We took turns, you know? It was all very democratic.”

“God, don’t you have any pride?” Ben hissed, face twisted in disgust. He was clearly shocked by Jared’s frank confession.

Jared lowered his head and Jensen watched his shoulders hitch and shake. His heart ached for his omega and he wanted to make it stop, but Jared lifted his face then and Jensen realized he’d been laughing and not crying. This was something, he recognized, that Jared needed to do in much the same way Kim wanted to face anyone who wanted to put her down. “Pride? Pride goes out the window when you have a child depending on you to feed and protect them. It’s actually the first thing you lose once you present as an omega and know how your world just narrowed down to practically nothing in the blink of an eye. Pride disappears once you’re told in school which bathrooms you can and cannot use anymore because of who you are and, more importantly, who you’re not. Pride is in the wind when your employer cheerfully signs paperwork declaring you a public health risk all so you can get a prescription for sups as a single omega.

“But you know what you get to replace it?” he said, spine straightening as he spoke. “You get strength instead.”

“…every accepted, scientific community has shown that alphas are more affected by daily, hormonal imbalances than what omegas suffer through twice a year. And despite advancements made in omega suppressants, pharmaceutical companies have yet to mass market anything to curb alpha drives, keeping the focus on omega biology as a health and safety concern, expertly managing to keep the prices for those suppressants artificially inflated…”

“Because without it,” Jared swallowed, voice lowering, “without it,” he repeated, “we wouldn’t survive.”

No one said a word, but Jensen squeezed Jared’s hand, unable to curb the pride he felt for this strong and capable omega. If Jared believed he had none left, Jensen would carry enough for them both.

Jared gave him a watery smile and freed himself from Jensen’s touch. “I think,” he said to Jensen alone, “that I’m going to head on up after all.” Jensen nodded slowly. Jared fussed with his jacket and pulled out his wallet. Jensen shook his head and held a hand up, wondering why Jared felt the need to offer him money.

But the omega pulled out three tens and set them on the bar. “This should cover their tab,” he offered in explanation. Standing up, he clutched his jacket close. “I know what it’s like to count every penny and worry about every bill when you don’t have a steady job and money is beyond tight,” he offered to a surprised Ben and Callum, “and how much it means when someone offers you help and not pity when you least expect it. It makes you feel like you’re somebody again. Like you’re not invisible any longer and not alone. This place,” he paused, stormy eyes holding onto Jensen’s for a long moment before they swept the room, “has done that for me. I hope you can see that, too.” He stepped away from the bar and walked around to the stairwell that led to Jensen’s place without a backward glance.

Jensen marveled at his omega. When he’d covered the alpha pair’s tab the other night, it had been meant to denigrate and insult them, repaying them in kind for what they’d done to Brock. When Jared did it now, it had been an act of, if not exactly kindness, one of tolerance and sympathy from someone who understood what it was like to be fearful and angry. He wondered if the two really
would get it?

“This has been an encore performance of ‘Alpha to omega: the history of omega rights in America’. I was asked to record additional commentary,” Dame Judi Dench’s presence filled the screen, finally visible and no longer merely a narrative voice, “after the surprising turn of events in the recent, American presidential race. It should go without saying, but I will say it for emphasis,” the silver-haired alpha carried on in her cultured, strong voice, “the eyes of the civilized world are now trained on the United States of America, fervently praying that the President Elect continues the work of his predecessor to move omega rights forward once he assumes the mantle of President and not take one step back. We are all watching.”

The sudden, ridiculously cheerful blare of a commercial was jarring and Jensen hit the “off” button on the remote reflexively. It seemed almost sacrilegious after all that to listen to an insurance ad, no matter how endearing Progressive’s Flo could be. It was Sam who eventually broke the uneasy silence.

“Now there’s some food for thought,” she muttered in her smoky voice. It wasn’t exactly clear if she meant Jared’s words or the documentary, but it really didn’t matter. They were one in the same at the end of the day.

“Definitely,” Jeff nodded, pink tiara bobbing precariously as he did. There were similar murmurss of assent in the pub, although Callum and Ben were uncharacteristically silent.

Jensen was torn. The bigger part of him wanted to rush upstairs and make sure Jared was all right, but his sense of obligation kept him rooted to the spot. DJ came up beside him and laid a bony hand on his shoulder.

“I can handle this if you want to take off early,” he offered quietly.

Jensen glanced at his watch, noting the pub was supposed to close in less than two hours. He didn’t really want to stick DJ with the whole thing, but his inner alpha was clawing at him to find and soothe his mate. He huffed, thinking about what that actor had said about alpha drives and how right she was. He was white-knuckling it as it was. However, before he could answer, folks started to ask for their bills one after the other. The evening, apparently, had affected many of them.

DJ and he began to close out tabs as their customers slowly disappeared into the freezing night. Jensen couldn’t help the smile that spread slow like molasses across his face when he spotted Steven holding the door for Jim or the way that Jeff casually curled his arm around Sam as they ducked out. Before he knew it, the Pitch & Roll was almost empty. Only Ben and Callum were left.

Jensen was tempted to let DJ deal with them, afraid of what he might do, but if Jared could be graceful around them, Jensen would do his best no to rip their heads off. “You two about finished?” he asked as casually as he could manage.

“Yeah,” Callum grumbled. He and Ben tossed down a five each before Ben went to grab their coats.

“That’s way too much,” Jensen called after them as they stood near the door, slipping on their jackets. Their contribution put them well over the bill plus a fair tip.

Ben, pulling on worn gloves, simply shrugged. “Give the overage back to him. Guess we don’t need quite as much help as some people think.” And he opened the door for Callum, letting it slap shut behind them in the November wind.

Jensen wasn’t completely sure of what to make of Ben’s parting words, but he wondered if maybe a
seed hadn’t been planted here tonight and what the folks of Winnegance could all eventually share by its growth. Before Jared, he might have resigned himself to only hoping for better, but he knew now that hope without action was little more than a wish. Hope needed to be backed up with deeds to flourish and take root. And as Jared had shown, those acts didn’t have to be violent. They could all take a lesson from him. He’d already learned so much from the omega himself.

“Go on,” DJ nudged him softly. Before Jensen could object, he said, “Nothing left but running the dishwasher and turning off the lights. I can do all that when I lock up to leave.”

“Are you sure?” Jensen worried.

“Dude,” he laughed and slapped Jensen’s arm. “It’s dishes, not brain surgery. It’s not going to take more than ten minutes,” he smiled. “Besides, it’s not like I’m that anxious to drive home in that anyway.” Jensen followed the cook’s gaze to the front window and saw the rain was turning to snow. He knew DJ rented a place a few towns over and absolutely hated driving in winter weather. When he thought about it, he came to the conclusion that he might just have a solution for the beta’s woes. Because if Jared said “yes”, the apartment above was going to be vacant soon enough and it was about time DJ got a raise.

“Be safe, buddy,” he replied, clapping the thin man on his shoulder, “and thanks,” he said, tossing his second rag of the evening into the sink behind the bar.

The beta smiled his sweet, goofy and endearing grin as he waved Jensen off. Tossing his head to clear the bangs from his eyes, he called out, “As soon as I get the dishes started, I’m outta here.”

Jensen gave him a brisk salute and took the stairs two at a time now that his obligations were fulfilled. He loved the natural dip in each step – worn by decades of use – and usually liked to imagine who had walked there before him, but he ate up the distance now, eager to be with Jared. When he opened the door to his place (not home), he noted few lights were on, leaving the place mostly blanketed in darkness. He kicked off his boots (a habit he’d carried over from Jared’s), lining them up beside the omega’s. Jared’s phone glowed a soft blue on the coffee table, revealing the hour, almost the only illumination in the room. Glancing around, Jensen finally spotted him standing by the window. The blinds were open, letting in the hazy, orange-red glow of the streetlights below. The omega’s long form was a sharp, black line against it.

Jensen walked up behind him and slipped his arms around Jared’s narrow waist and pressed a kiss to the nape of his neck. Nosing around behind his ear, Jensen smelled anger and sorrow, and yet, beneath it all, there was determination, too.

“The snow is so beautiful,” Jared murmured, arms still wrapped about himself like he was trying to self-soothe. “It seems like the only time the earth is quiet is when it’s snowing, you know? Everything looks the same then.” He uncurled one arm to place his palm flat against the window. “I’m sorry if I said too much tonight,” he whispered.

Jensen shook his head back and forth against the space between Jared’s shoulder blades. The revelation about the landlord was not new to Jensen. He and Jared had spoken before Halloween at length about their sexual histories, reassuring each other they had been tested since their last, respective encounters. “Nothing to be sorry about, except that it happened at all, sweetheart,” he assured the younger man, hooking his chin around Jared’s left shoulder. He felt Jared soften against him then, snow melting into rain, like he had let down the last of his defenses. He gripped Jensen’s linked hands hard.

“You apologizing just means that I’ve made you feel like you can’t speak your mind in front of me and I’m truly sorry for that,” he whispered against Jared’s throat, breathing in the familiar omega’s
“What?” Jared gasped, twisting around in his hold.

Jensen lowered his eyes. “It’s like with Kim, I think. I’m so worried about protecting y’all,” and he cringed inwardly as that little bit of Texas slipped out, “that I’m smothering you in the process.”

“What?” Jared repeated, but there was a strange sound to his question, like there was laughter hiding in it.

Ducking his head down, Jensen went on, “It must be the alpha in me, wanting to control everything, smooth everything over. Make it right.” And he shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

Before he could bat an eye, Jared’s long, slender fingers were cradling his face and tilting it back up. Reluctantly, Jensen took a good, long look at the everchanging colors in Jared’s tilted eyes and saw only wonder reflected back at him.

“You don’t smother me, love,” Jared croaked and Jensen’s heart swelled at the endearment. “It’s because of you that I’ve found my voice. You gave that back to me and so much more.” With infinite gentleness, like Jensen was something precious, Jared kissed him soft and sweet, moist flesh against his. And then he broke away, gaze flicking back and forth between Jensen’s eyes. “I’d do anything for you,” he breathed. “I’d give you anything you asked for, alpha.” Before Jensen could process that, Jared slowly and gracefully sank to his knees, pulling aside the collar of his pristine, white shirt and bared his neck.

In the sodium light filtered through the window, Jensen saw the earnest expression on his face; the way his body was completely exposed and open and defenseless just for him. The pose was one as old as time in their people’s history. It was one of surrender and submission, to be sure, but it was also clearly one given and not taken and that made all the difference in the world. The alpha within him was roaring in delight, rising to the surface unbidden. But Jensen had wanted it to be perfect when he asked the question, slowly realizing that sometimes “right” and “perfect” happened whether you were ready for it or not. He bent down and clasped Jared’s hands, urging him to stand.

“This is all wrong,” he rasped once Jared was upright, “for what I had in mind. I should be the one on his knees.”

Jared wrinkled his forehead and tilted his head, unsure and off-balance. Jensen suspected he feared a rejection and Jensen wanted to laugh at the absurdity of that worry. “Marry me,” he exhaled, one corner of his mouth quirking upward.

Jared’s breath caught, nothing more than a sticky click in his throat. “Jensen,” he finally got out, eyes widening in wonder, “you don’t have to say that just because I offered myself to you. I trust you.” There was no denying the genuine earnestness in the omega’s words. Jensen reached up and caressed the side of his face.

“C’mere,” he urged, offering Jared his hand.

Stopping only to collect Jared’s phone (they had a daughter to keep track of, after all), Jensen led him through the darkened hallway to his bedroom, secretly glad he had changed the sheets that morning. He didn’t miss the way Jared’s breathing picked up. The omega had been prepared to spend the night, but now that they were in the alpha’s bedroom, Jensen could tell he was nervous.

“Please sit,” Jensen urged him gently and Jared settled himself on the side of the bed. Located at the opposite end of the street, the room’s only light came from the moon, muted by the snowy, gray
skies. Fumbling for the bedside lamp, Jensen clicked it on and kneeled in front of it to rummage through the nightstand drawer. “Here,” he said, handing Jared the marriage form he’d gotten and almost completely filled out on Monday, the day he’d adopted Jamie. While Jared angled the paper toward the small circle of light and read it, Jensen fumbled for a pen, handing that off to the omega, too. “It’s only missing your signature.”

Even in the weak light, Jensen didn’t miss the liquid pooling along Jared’s lower lids. “I was always going to ask you,” Jensen assured him gently. “You only need to sign at the bottom and we can get a license on Monday and be married by the weekend.” Suddenly realizing he was missing something, Jensen turned back to the drawer and pulled out a black, velvet box. He slowly opened it for Jared, revealing the gold ring nestled within.

“That is,” he laughed nervously, “if you say ‘yes’, of course. It’s a Claddagh ring,” Jensen barreled on, not giving Jared a chance to speak (to say ‘no’), “which is popular among the Irish and Irish-Americans. My grandaddy wore one.”

Scooting closer, Jensen pointed out the various parts of the design, pleased his finger didn’t shake when he did. “The hands clasping the heart symbolize friendship and the heart itself is love, obviously,” he cut his eyes away for a moment, “and the crown means loyalty.” Jared set the pen and paper aside to run a trembling finger along the yellow gold. “The style here is a little more modern, smooth edges and all. One story goes that it was designed by Richard Joyce, a silversmith from Galway in 1700. He designed it while a slave of a Moorish goldsmith. When he was freed, he gave it to his sweetheart.”

“Jensen…” Jared began hesitantly.

“If you wear it with the heart’s point at your fingertips, it means your heart is open and you’re available. The other direction and you’re involved. But on the left hand,” he continued, not looking up, “with the point at your fingertips, it means you’re engaged. Your intended turns it the other way during the marriage ceremony,” he finished without taking a breath, holding the box higher, ignoring the ache in his knees from the wooden floor. “This can be a promise ring, too, if you’re not ready. Or a friendship ring. It can be whatever you want it to be, Jared. Just be mine. Please.”

Jared stared at him for what seemed like forever before he carefully removed the ring from its cushioned bed. Jensen watched Jared’s hands like they were creatures with their own minds and dreams. With slow deliberation, the omega slipped the crowned heart onto his left hand, point down. “I want to be yours,” Jared answered. He slid down onto his knees before Jensen. “And I want you to be mine.”

The box fell out of Jensen’s hands, forgotten, when the alpha pulled Jared to him. Kissing him, Jensen barely skated his tongue along the seam of Jared’s mouth, nudging at his upper lip to ask the omega to let him in. With a deep moan, Jared parted his lips even as he tilted his head to the side to grant Jensen a better angle, their bodies already in tune. Tangling his tongue with Jared’s, Jensen reveled in the moist sweetness and needed more.

He lowered one hand and began to tug at the back of Jared’s shirt, desperate to feel skin beneath his hands, sighing in relief when he could mold his palms against the small of Jared’s back. But that still wasn’t enough.

“Off,” he growled, wiggling his hands around his (Jared had said “yes”) omega’s waist, working the rest of Jared’s neat and prim shirt free, loving his boy mussed and undone. Jared gave a breathless chuckle, one arm draped around Jensen’s strong neck and the other resting on his shoulder while he tripped his fingers through the alpha’s short locks. The gentle, teasing touch sent sparks shivering down Jensen’s spine. He fumbled with Jared’s buttons like a drunkard, nearly tearing one off, before
finally baring Jared’s toned chest to his eager eyes. Trading hungry, open-mouthed kisses, Jared dropped his hands to Jensen’s overshirt and sought to return the favor. Jensen shucked it off, pulling away only long enough to take in all the smooth skin before him, before swooping down to mouth along Jared’s sternum. Jared clutched at Jensen’s head, lightly holding him in place as he did.

Leaving sucking marks of possession on the omega’s firm chest, Jensen dragged his hands up Jared’s side, lingering over his tight nipples. He couldn’t resist and brushed his callused thumbs again and again over the peaks until Jared groaned and dropped his head back against the mattress behind him. Jensen straightened up as his kissed along that taut expanse of skin along his neck, but the gunshot crack of bone startled a chuckle out of both of them and they fell away from each other, gasping around their laughter. Like a small dash of cold water, Jensen sobered up and considered their location. It might do for a Harlequin romance, two people caught up in the flames of their passion, but his knees would never forgive him. He reluctantly stood, only wincing slightly when the other joint popped with slightly less fanfare and offered Jared his hands.

“Seems a shame to waste a perfectly good bed, don’t you think?” he teased. Jared smiled, but there was still that nervous energy to his motions – a mixture of shyness warring with desire. Maybe taking a moment would be good for both of them.

Helping Jared up, he sat the omega back on his bed and joined him. With a crinkle of paper and a wince, Jensen then extracted the government form and damned pen from under his backside. He opened the drawer and placed them back inside before they got more wrecked. Two items caught his eye when he did and he knew at least one would be needed before they went much further. Carefully pulling out the clear, plastic case that housed his knot band, he placed it on the nightstand.

Jared shifted beside him and cleared his throat. “Ah,” he began, fidgeting like Jamie did when she was anxious.

Jensen turned to give him his full attention. His shoulders blocked part of the illumination from the lamp, leaving Jared in a strange mixture of shadows and moonlight. With his wavy hair half in his eyes and white shirt hanging open, he looked like a debauched angel to Jensen.

“You know that I’ve only ever been with Eric,” he started, eyes darting around and hands in his lap. “And with Mr. Pellegrino.” Jensen grit his teeth, thinking that Jared’s former landlord didn’t even deserve the courtesy of a title. “Bastard” would have worked just fine and it was what Jensen called him in his head anyway. But he put that away as he covered Jared’s busy, fluttering fingers.

Comfortingly, Jensen assured him, “I know, sweetheart.”

Jared swallowed hard, head bobbing as he did. “What you don’t know is that Eric and I only ever had sex when I was in heat that one time.” He said it in a rush, words running together in his haste to get them out and it took Jensen a minute to process what Jared wasn’t saying. Maybe assuming Jensen’s silence was one of ignorance, he continued, “So I,” and he wiggled a hand free and waved it toward the pillows behind them, “don’t really know what to do. I know they say we omegas are naturals at this, but –”

Jensen surged forward and caught his pink lips in a kiss, partially to stop Jared from saying anything else and partly to reassure him of how Jensen felt. When they parted, Jared finally met his gaze.

“I just want it to be perfect for you,” he whispered.

Smiling lopsidedly, Jensen cupped Jared’s cheek with one hand, pleased that his omega tipped his face into the contact. “It’s already perfect because you said ‘yes’, angel. Everything else is secondary.” And like that had been the permission that Jared had somehow been waiting for, he
leaned in and kissed Jensen, the scent of that midnight blossom flooding his senses.

Jensen cradled the back of Jared’s head with his hand, fingers tightening in his soft hair as that scent went straight to his groin. Reluctantly pulling away, with Jared’s lips still chasing after his, he said, “You’re like the finest whiskey the way you go to my head, darlin’.”

His pants had grown uncomfortable and Jensen needed to ask this next question before he was too lost to his alpha. Scrabbling back for the case, he showed Jared the knot band. “You want me to wear this?” And he would, even though he was dying to feel that connection with Jared for their first time. But he understood and respected that it might be too much to ask and he wanted Jared to have the final say in their physical relationship. Jensen wanted him to have that hard-won voice of his.

Jared’s gaze dropped to the case and then lifted back to Jensen. “You know I’m on sups,” he stated quietly.

“And that’s great,” Jensen assured him, still not accepting that as an answer. Knotting was as intimate as sex was and he wanted Jared to decide how far he wanted them to go tonight. But as soon as he spoke, Jared dipped his head and let his bangs hide what little Jensen saw of his face. Moreover, the omega’s heady scent began to recede and Jensen didn’t have a clue what he had done to cause that.

“Hey now,” he asked worriedly, grabbing ahold of Jared’s hand. “What’s wrong?” But Jared remained silent and Jensen racked his brains until he understood it had been his overeager response to Jared on suppressants that must have been it. “I believe a baby should be wanted and planned for in this day and age. That’s why I’m glad you’re on the pill.”

Jared raised his head a little and his eyes peeped up at Jensen through the tangled strands of hair hanging in his face. “You’d want one someday, though?”

Jensen breathed deeply. “Sweetheart,” he replied, squeezing Jared’s hands tight, “I’d love to have another child with you someday. With the suppressants, we can plan when it would make the most sense, like if you wanted to deliver during the summer so you’d have time to bond before school started back up for you and stuff like that.”

He smiled encouragingly at Jared, but was dismayed to see tears puddling his eyes again. “Hey now,” he repeated worriedly, cradling his face and thumbing the thin skin below his eye. “What’d I say?”

Jared’s expression cracked open and a tear snuck its way past Jensen’s finger. “You said ‘another’,” he smiled like sunshine breaking through a storm cloud.

Jensen furrowed his brow until he understood what Jared was trying to say. “Hell yeah,” he agreed. “You’ve already given me one, beautiful child. You think I’d be a fool and pass up another one?” And he curled a hand behind Jared’s neck and urged him forward. Their kiss tasted like salt.

When they broke apart, Jared plucked the case out of Jensen’s other hand and tossed it to the floor. He moved closer, breath tickling Jensen’s face. “I want to feel you,” he exhaled. “I’ll always want to feel all of you, alpha.” Jared was close enough that his lashes feathered Jensen’s cheek and the alpha was gone.

Finding both hands free, Jensen put them to good use. He backed away slightly from his omega and reached around for the lamp. Without asking, he turned it off, leaving them in nothing more than the silver glimmer of the nearly full moon. It seemed fitting to him somehow and the smile he received assured him he’d made the right choice. With sure hands, Jensen pushed Jared’s shirt back and down
his arms, fingers leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake. Jared obliged him by shaking it completely free.

“I want to look at you,” Jensen croaked. “All of you. May I?”

Jared rolled his lower lip into his mouth and bit down hard, but raised and lowered his head in acquiescence. And that perfume that was only for Jensen returned stronger than ever. Jensen slid his hands under Jared’s arms and, half-standing, lifted him up and maneuvered him onto the bed fully. He could smell the uneasy arousal coming from Jared in waves. Jensen eased himself onto the bed as slowly as he could, despite the way his alpha wanted to pounce, knee-walking his way up Jared’s body until he was above him. He dipped down and dragged his nose from behind Jared’s ear down until he rested his lips against a prominent collarbone, just breathing in his scent for a minute.

Jared shifted restlessly underneath him, hands skimming up and down his broad back, blindly trying to find the hem of Jensen’s Zeppelin t-shirt. Jensen huffed a laugh against his omega’s skin and pulled himself upright. With his eyes zeroed in on Jared, he easily reached behind his shoulder with one hand and yanked the shirt over his head, throwing it away with careless abandon.

Jared reached out with his hands and Jensen presented himself for his omega’s inspection. His graceful fingers danced along Jensen’s skin, connecting freckles with childish delight. “You’re so beautiful, alpha,” Jared confessed and Jensen’s cock jumped in his jeans. “So strong,” Jared continued, mostly unaware of what he was truly doing to Jensen. His legs fell open naturally, making room for Jensen’s hips to slot between them and the alpha groaned.

“You’re the beautiful one,” he said, lowering himself down to continue to lick and kiss his way along the endless distance of skin stretched over the lanky body before him. He swiped his tongue, quick like a snake, across one rosy nipple and delighted in the sweet gasp Jared made. Licking his lips, Jensen dove back in like the tender nub was a feast just for him. He chewed gently, teasing the other with his thumb and forefinger, while Jared’s head thrashed from side to side. Another time, he vaguely thought, Jensen wanted to see if he could get Jared to come from only this. There was so much he wanted to test, but, for now, he wanted Jared to come another way.

Abandoning the lovingly abused nipples, hands tapping along Jared’s ribs like the omega was an instrument he was playing, Jensen circled his navel with his nose. Closer now to the most intimate parts of his omega, Jensen struggled to retain the finger grip hold he had on his control. Already, the base of his cock was tingling and tightening and it took a monumental effort to keep his knot from popping. If he was teasing Jared, he was downright torturing himself. But Jared made everything new again, like it was his first time, too, and Jensen wanted to savor that.

Tracing the mound surrounding Jared’s navel with his nose, Jensen licked and teased the sensitive skin, relishing every jerk and buck that Jared’s hips made in the process. When he plunged his tongue in that sweet divot, Jared all but shot off the bed and it was only Jensen’s iron grip on the omega’s hips that kept him in place.

Raising his eyes, Jensen smirked at the wanton sight Jared made. Perspiration beading along his face, Jared’s hair stuck to his forehead and cheeks in lank strands. A pink sunrise had colored his skin, visible even in the pale moonlight, and that flush creeped down his neck to his stain his chest. His omega was stunning in his arousal.

“Look at you,” Jensen exhaled without meaning to.

“Jensen,” Jared mewled, hands clenching and releasing his shoulders.

“Can I?” Jensen asked. He would always ask.
“Please, Jensen, do something. I-I need…”

Heavy-headed like he was drunk, Jensen reluctantly pushed himself up to his knees again and traced the creases and lines of Jared’s cut abs with his rough fingertips. Although he would never have the same bulk as an alpha, Jared was exquisitely muscled, like a Greek statue sculpted to the Golden ratio. When his fingers came to rest against Jared’s jeans, searching for the buttons, Jared picked his head up and clasped his hands over Jensen’s. His arousal, visibly pushing against the denim, didn’t diminish, but he was nibbling on his lower lip again.

“I,” he stuttered, “I wanted to do something nice for you.”

Raising an eyebrow, Jensen had no idea what Jared meant by that. Slowly, he thumbed open the first button, eyes drifting back down and catching the dark trim of Jared’s boxers. However, with each button Jensen undid, it revealed that boxers were not quite what Jared was wearing underneath his Levi’s 501 jeans.

“What?” Jensen gasped, peeling away Jared’s jeans and his socks in a mad dash, flinging them aside. He backed up until he was standing at the end of the bed, taking in everything exposed before him.

Jared shifted against Jensen’s bedding, hands gripping and releasing the pure white sheets beneath him reflexively. In the vague, half-light, the deep maroon, lacy boyshorts that hugged his lean hips appeared almost black.

“Sweet Christ,” Jensen growled, slapping a hand down to his cock to keep himself from coming where he stood. Blood had rushed south with such force, he was dizzy with it. He’d never been with a partner that had worn such pretty underthings before and he didn’t know he had a kink for it until he saw Jared wearing them. Or maybe it was just a Jared kink. Jensen was coming to believe he would love anything that Jared did, said or wore as long as it was only for him.

Dragging a hand over his cock, which was clearly pushing against the delicate scrap of material, Jared’s blush deepened. “I’ve never worn anything like this before,” he rasped.

“Good,” Jensen snapped, thumbing open his jeans, which had become unbearably tight. He pulled down his zipper, sighing in relief as his throbbing dick sprang free and let his jeans tumble to his feet.

Jared gulped audibly, eyes riveted to his rigid member. “You,” he licked his lips, “you weren’t wearing anything?”

Shucking his socks off with his feet, Jensen smirked and lowered his hands to the end of the bed. His cock was swollen and heavy between his thighs, copiously leaking pre-come. “I’ve got a few surprises up my sleeve, darlin’,” he drawled, slowly crawling back on the bed, “but nothing as spectacular as that.”

Jared smiled shyly, so at odds with the wanton picture he painted with his body. “I hoped you’d like them,” he confessed.

Straddling his omega’s knees, Jensen tentatively passed his hands over the lace of the shorts, pressing the material into Jared’s skin, the threads catching every once in a while against the calluses on his hands. He leaned down, mouthing along the length of Jared’s cock, teasingly revealed and yet not by the delicate pattern of deep red. Lifting his head up briefly, Jensen croaked, “Bet you’d look real pretty in blue, too.” He was rewarded by a genuine smile, dimples and all, from Jared, who must have been needlessly fretting that Jensen hadn’t been insanely turned on by what he was wearing.

“But as pretty a package as this is,” he confessed, propping himself up on his elbows and hooking
his hands around the band at the top, “I’d really like to get at what’s underneath.” With almost painful, deliberate slowness, Jensen pulled the lacy underwear down, inch by inch.

Jared’s cock bobbed up immediately, red and leaking like Jensen’s. The alpha paused what he was doing to duck his head down and drag the flat of his tongue from root to tip with a growl rumbling from deep within his chest. Jared whimpered, hips jolting spastically and head hitting the pillows stacked behind him.

“Perfect,” Jensen mumbled against the rigid, hot flesh, before peeling the lace down. “Lift up, baby,” he urged Jared, nudging at the cut of his hips with his thumbs. Jared raised his head, hair plastered to his forehead, eyes glazed.

“You hips, sweetheart. Don’t want to mess these up,” he tugged on the panties, “because I definitely want to see you wearing them again.”

Fingers pressing restlessly into the mattress, Jared jerked his hips up, a blurt of pre-come dribbling down his length, and Jensen chuckled at the loss of control. Scooting back, he dragged the dark lace down with teasing leisure, enjoying the muscled legs along the way. When he had them free of Jared’s strong, yet fragile (his omega was such a contradiction), feet, Jensen couldn’t help himself. He brought the small bundle of material up to his nose and breathed deeply, making sure Jared saw it all. His eyes fluttered shut and he groaned deep and long.

“You smell so fuckin’ good, angel,” he rasped and grew ridiculously harder. Jensen had no idea how he was going to hang on, but he was determined to make Jared come at least once before he was even inside him.

Placing the panties carefully off to the side, Jensen scented something sweeter than that secret garden bloom scent that was Jared’s alone – his omega’s slick. While the sups would prevent him from getting pregnant or producing enough moisture to make mating smooth and easy, they apparently couldn’t stop him from making a little and Jensen suddenly needed to taste that sugary temptation.

Crawling up the long distance he had just covered, Jensen never took his eyes off Jared, not wanting to break that connection between them. Hands firmly gripping his omega’s hips, Jensen swiped his tongue along his lower lip. “I wanna taste you, angel. Can I?”

Jared bobbed his head, half-drunk on arousal, and pulled Jensen in for a kiss. He obliged, laying completely on top of his omega, lips parted and tongue flicking into his warm mouth while his hips rutted against Jared’s, cocks bumping and grinding against each other with sweet friction. With a grunt, Jensen wrenched himself away and returned his hands to Jared’s waist, urging him to roll over.

“Wha?” Jared murmured unintelligibly (and Jensen had done that – rendered his insanely smart mate incompetent) even as he rolled over onto his stomach.

Jensen purred in satisfaction, dragging his hands down the muscled skin of Jared’s back, feeling the muscles slide and shift underneath the smooth skin. There wasn’t a single part of his omega that he didn’t find beautiful. But he worked his fingers down further, thumbs dipping into the dimples above Jared’s tempting ass before he began to kneed and pull the round muscles like he was working dough. Finally daring to tug them apart, Jensen gazed down on Jared’s most secret part – pink and winking at him in the moonlight. He caught sight of a silvery trickle and breathed heavily through his nose, nostrils flaring at the smell. Without hesitation, he dove in, burying his face between Jared’s ass cheeks.

Jensen breathed deep even as Jared squirmed at the intrusion. “S’dirty,” he mumbled, face smothered
by a pillow.

Jensen pulled back enough to speak. “It’s perfect,” he countered and lunged back in, pressing his tongue against the sticky trail, finally tasting his omega. Like ripe, summer berries, the flavor all but exploded on his tongue and he couldn’t get enough. Jensen needed to get to the source and speared his tongue inside Jared’s silken walls.

“Ahh,” Jared moaned, long and low, head snapping back.

Jensen pressed his tongue in as far as he could reach, pressing against the supple walls of his omega’s channel. The heat was startling and he couldn’t wait to slip his cock inside all that smooth warmth. Pulling back only far enough to lap at the entrance, Jensen moved his hands in, thumbing the tender rim of Jared’s entrance. Unable to resist, Jensen nibbled along the slightly swollen flesh, breathing in the deep, primeval scent of his mate.

Twisting his head to the side, he bit playful at one cheek, making Jared yelp. “I gotta,” he mumbled into the firm flesh beneath him and scrabbled blindly for the nightstand drawer. Like someone newly blind, he weakly rummaged around in the drawer before crowing in success as he pulled out the half-used bottle of lube he kept there.

Flipping the cap open, Jensen carelessly drizzled a long stream into the crack of Jared’s ass before liberally coating his hand, too. All the while, Jared canted his ass back, missing Jensen’s touch.

“Jensen,” he moaned, thrashing his head back and forth against the mattress.

Jensen urged his hips up, one hand on his waist, guiding him to his hands and knees. “C’mon, angel.”

Jared did as he was directed, but dropped to his elbows, pillowing his head on his forearms. Jensen laughed, whole body vibrating with it. “That’ll work, too.”

Back up on his knees, Jensen kept his hand on Jared’s hip while he teased along the rim of his hole with a wet finger before finally pushing inside. He moaned at the same time Jared did, when that wet heat practically sucked his finger in to the first knuckle. “So beautiful,” he mumbled, working that digit deeper inside his mate until it was completely swallowed up. With infinite care, Jensen began to slide it back and forth, mimicking what he’d soon be doing with his cock. The tingling at the base of his member was growing unbearable and he knew if he didn’t hurry, he’d pop his knot long before he was ever inside Jared’s perfect heat.

When he pulled out almost completely, Jensen paired up another finger and began scissoring them with the new thrusts, rewarded with a long, drawn-out sigh from Jared, who had begun to thrust back with each stroke inside of Jensen’s fingers.

“That’s it, darlin’,” he whispered encouragingly, blinking sweat out of his eyes. His heart was pounding. “You’re takin’ it so good.” The praise seemed to spur Jared on, who began to push back stronger and stronger with each thrust. Soon enough (not soon enough), Jensen was up to three and he was sure that Jared was close to taking his cock. When he pulled his hand away, he took a moment to stare at Jared’s fluttering hole as his omega continued to thrust his hips back on empty air, missing that fullness Jensen had given him.

“Jensen,” he whined, long and pained.

“Here, baby,” Jensen breathed into his neck after dropping on top of him, forcing Jared flat onto the bed, hips rocking back and forth, cock sliding between Jared’s cheeks with slippery ease. “Right
here,” he reassured Jared. “Right here.”

With a burst of strength, Jensen rolled them both over, manhandling Jared upright, so that his omega was kneeling astride Jensen’s hips, facing his feet. Grabbing onto his hipbones, Jensen raised Jared up and bent his knees slightly, forcing Jared to widen his own kneeling stance. And then he slowly began to lower Jared down onto his stiff cock until the head nudged at Jared’s slick and well-prepared opening.

“Ooooh,” Jared sighed, feeling that teasing fullness at his opening.

“Brace your hands on my knees, angel. Your pace, your show,” he encouraged Jared.

The omega floundered for a second, arms floppy like spaghetti until he seemed to get with the program. Slapping his hands on Jensen’s knees, he slowly lowered himself down onto Jensen’s cock. Jensen kept one hand clamped on Jared’s left hip, using his right to guide himself inside Jared’s willing hole.

They both sighed in unison as Jared began to sink down. “Your pace,” Jensen grunted, sweat dripping off his brow, shifting his hand to the base of his cock once Jared swallowed up the head. He needed the physical restriction to keep his knot from popping, the heat surrounding him almost too much as Jared inched his way farther down his swollen length.

“Oh, God,” he hissed. Jared was suddenly all around him, holding him safe inside his body and it was almost too much for the alpha, watching the muscles in the small of Jared’s back work to accommodate him. He roughly dragged his hands up and down Jared’s sides. “So good,” he rasped, “so perfect. My angel. My omega.”

That seemed to spur Jared into action. He lifted up until only the head of Jensen’s cock was still inside before dropping back down, letting Jensen’s hand and gravity guide him. With a squeeze of encouragement from him, Jared began to set a rapid pace, riding Jensen’s dick like he always had, head eventually falling back in ecstasy.

“Jensen,” he cried, almost bouncing in Jensen’s lap, squeezing his knees against Jensen’s thighs. “Jensen,” he called out again, louder, and he was coming, walls clenching tight around his cock like a fist. There was no way for Jensen to stop himself then and he watched, mesmerized, as his knot began to swell. With each tightening pass, Jared’s rim stretched wider to accommodate the growing flesh and Jensen traced a shaky finger around the stretched taut skin, consuming him with each pass until he was fully seated and locked tight with his mate.

Jared collapsed back onto Jensen’s broad chest, head falling across his right shoulder. Jensen lifted up to lick along Jared’s neck, rolling them both onto their side, the smell of Jared’s release heavy in the air. Jared, not willing to be denied, twisted his torso to the left so that he could find Jensen’s lips. Sloppy kisses were exchanged between them as Jensen hooked his left arm under Jared’s left thigh, hiking his leg up high enough that Jensen could get ahold of his omega’s spent cock, too. With teasing strokes, he kept pumping the flesh until Jared was hard again. His omega winced, threw his right arm across his eyes and began to thrust up into Jensen’s loosely curled fist and then back against his knot.

Once he did that, Jensen let his alpha free. Although the angle was tough, with him on his side, he began to shove upward as much as his knot allowed, pushing them both up the bed as he did so. Jensen buried his face in the space between Jared’s neck and shoulder, breathing in moist air with every lunge, marveling at how deep inside his mate he was.

Jensen felt the tightening of his balls and knew he was close. Ripples of electricity started in his stomach and raced up his spine. Just before he began releasing inside of his mate, he clamped his jaw over the erotic join of neck to shoulder, marking his claim forever on Jared for all to see and no one to question.

“Guh!” Jared cried, spurting all over himself and Jensen’s hand while Jensen began to spray hot inside his mate, spouse, partner.

Jensen was vaguely aware that Jared came a third time, without a pause between the second, growing lax in his arms while Jensen continued to thrust upward, desperate for more leverage and sweetly denied by the clenching grip Jared’s body kept on him. It was a thousand times better buried in his mate than it had been with Danneel. He briefly hoped she’d found someone half as wonderful as Jared, before he lost himself for a time in his mate’s heat.

When Jensen became aware of his surroundings again, he nipped along Jared’s ear, but got no response. Shifting, he saw that Jared was still insensate, overcome from their mating. He readjusted them until they were both resting on their right sides easing the strain on Jared’s shoulders. Jensen looped his left arm around him, pulling him close against his chest where Jared could feel his heartbeat against his skin. Jensen struggled to get his breathing under control, planting lazy kisses along Jared’s sweaty neck, licking the salty skin as he did. His knot was deliciously wrung out by Jared’s channel and he knew they’d be tied for a long time to come. He was tired and exhilarated at the same time. He felt whole.

“Mmm,” Jared eventually hummed, reaching weakly for Jensen’s arm.

“Love you,” Jensen breathed into the curve of Jared’s ear and his mate smiled, clapping Jensen’s arm and squeezing his walls against his knot, too. Another burst of come was forced out of Jensen then, making them both moan.

“Alpha,” Jared sighed.

“Mate,” Jensen replied, pressing a kiss to Jared’s jaw.

Jared clutched his arm tighter.

They lay in the moonlight, neither speaking but reveling in the closeness that only tying together brought, heartbeats and breath in sync. Jared brushed his fingers rhythmically up and down Jensen’s arm and the alpha thought his mate had actually fallen back to sleep until Jared stopped the motion and murmured, “You changed your tattoo.

Shifting over so that he could place a lingering kiss against Jared’s shoulder, Jensen nodded.

Jared traced his fingers along what used to be his golden aviator wings, now part of a fiery phoenix bursting to life. “Non sibi,” Jared recited, following along the words Jensen had inked into his skin more years ago than he cared to admit, “sed,” he paused.

It was here that Jared the tattoo artist had worked his magic. Not only had he transformed his wings into those of the mystical bird, he had made “patriae” appear to have melted from the heat, revealing the new end to the phrase.

“Prō domō,” he finished. “I don’t know that one.”

Jensen pulled Jared closer and couldn’t stifle a moan when Jared pushed his ass back against the knot firmly embedded within him. “Not fair, darlin’,” Jensen growled, tugging against the fleshy lobe of Jared’s ear with his teeth before placing a surprisingly chaste kiss there.
“What’s it mean?” Jared whispered.

“Not for self, but family’,” Jensen told him, rocking his hips forward. “You and Jamie walked into my bar and that was it for me. You two were everything I could ever hope to have. I love you with everything that I am.”

Jared twisted around as much as he could and awkwardly hooked his left hand to stroke Jensen’s face. Jensen smiled and kissed his omega’s palm.

“You, too,” Jared croaked. “I couldn’t believe how amazing you were to us.” He looked like he was on the verge of tears. “You know why I came here,” he eventually continued when he had himself under control.

“For the job,” Jensen nodded, swiveling his hips and making Jared shiver.

“And,” Jared continued after he caught his breath, “because of where this place is.”

Jensen remembered Jared’s tipsy confession of “location, location, location” that one night. “Because it’s near Canada,” he said softly, afraid the nightmare would come to fruition if he spoke louder.

Jared cut his gaze away with a jerk of his head, focusing on the window where the snow continued to fall, blanketing everything in white. “I was hoping, like so many others, that the Democratic nominee would win, but I had to have a contingency plan for Jamie. I figured this close to the border, I could run if I had to.”

Unconsciously, Jensen gripped Jared closer to him, like he could hide Jared beneath his skin.

“I wasn’t counting on falling in love,” Jared chuckled, settling back against Jensen, “with the perfect alpha.”

“Not perfect,” Jensen murmured into Jared’s neck.

“You kind of are, even if Stephen didn’t believe me,” Jared laughed softly.

At the mention of the other alpha, Jensen couldn’t help the growl that rumbled out of his chest.

Jared stroked his hand up and down Jensen’s arm, unconsciously grinding his ass against his groin to remind him of their connection. “He said that even if you did claim me, there’s no way of knowing what’s going to happen once the Republican takes office,” Jared continued, oblivious to Jensen’s distress. “Just this week he was telling me that I should take Jamie and sneak into Canada. He has family near Hemmingford, which is right across the border from Vermont. He said we could cross through the woods at night and literally hop over a ditch and be in Canada. Once there, I could claim refugee status for Jamie and myself.”

So that had been what they’d been talking about this past week. Jensen held himself perfectly still.

“Why didn’t you take him up on it?”

“Because I knew you’d keep Jamie safe no matter what changes the future brings with it,” Jared replied without hesitation. Jensen relaxed his hold, slightly mollified. “And I know you’d have my back, too.”

Feeling the entire length of Jared’s lean, sweaty body pressed against him, the alpha couldn’t help the laugh that spilled out. “Like this?”

“I trust you, Jensen. With my daughter’s life,” he added solemnly, “and with mine.”
Blinking back surprising tears, Jensen hugged him closer.

“And I’m not going to run. This is our home. It’s not perfect, but running away won’t change anything.” Jared was quiet for several moments, before he spoke again. “I won’t give anyone that satisfaction anymore. I’m going to keep fighting, because there’s something here worth fighting for.”

Jensen rolled Jared as best he could, given the way they were tied, until the omega was almost on his back, looking up at him with those mesmerizing eyes.

“And I’ll keep fighting for you,” Jensen whispered, dipping his head down and claiming his mate in a kiss that promised forever.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

And this 3k (give or take another 102k) auction story has come to an end. While I've been dangling the promise of a timestamp to my good friend as a bribe to get her to finish her own, amazing story, I make no promises to ever revisit this world.

Thanks again to Casey679 for their generosity in the fandom auction!
You can find out about fic updates and what I'm planning on working on at my Tumblr, where I also post fic recs for bottom!Jared/Sam stories.

This post will tell you about the blog, so you know what you're getting into. :) 

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!