1978

by sonofabiscuit77

Summary

England, 1978: a time of strikes, class warfare, power shortages and institutional homophobia. At an elite boarding school, scholarship student, Jensen Ackles, grocer's son and fly-half for the school's Rugby First XV, falls in love with fellow boarder, Jared Padalecki, stockbroker's son and aspiring artist. But the path of love never runs smooth, especially for two boys in 1970’s England with the world, and society, against them.

Notes

Thanks as always to my fabulous and talented beta, dear_tiger and thanks also to my lovely artist, banbury and please go check out her atmospheric and beautiful artwork.

Just as a quick note for non-Brit folk, I'm sure a lot of you know this already, but the Lower Sixth covers ages 16-17, and Upper Sixth ages 17-18 and they study A-levels over these two years prior to attending university, (or at least they did during the time period relevant to this fic). Generally, Sixth Formers study between 2-4 A levels.
…You touch me;
I hear the sound of mandolins;
You kissed me;
With your kiss my life begins…”

“Now there’s a look in your eyes, like black holes in the sky,” Pickford reads. He turns beady eyes on the class. “Now that, boys, is real poetry.” He leans over the record player at the front of the classroom. The record is already spinning, and Pickford lowers the stylus with a hiss and crackle.

On Jensen’s left, Claude "Eggy" Fitzgerald leans over and whispers, "Is he fucking kidding or what?"

"Not kidding," Jensen whispers back.

"Jesus, what a cock."

Jensen smirks, working his mouth soundlessly over the words, murmuring them in his head. You’re a cock, Pickford. A big, fat, dirty, old cock…

Pickford rounds on him. "Something to say, Ackles?"

"No, Sir."

"Good. Because we don’t want to hear it." Pickford spins on his heels and slaps the board duster against the blackboard in a chalk dust cloud. "I want you all to close your eyes." He glares at them all. "That means all of you."

Jensen lowers his eyelids reluctantly, sliding down in his seat. Pickford leans over the record player once more, lifts up the stylus to drop it down again, moving them onto the part of the record that
actually has lyrics. Jensen stares at the back of Edward "Two Shits" Reynolds’s head directly in front of him. The kid’s got a terrible dandruff problem, small flecks dotted neatly all over his greasy hair.

On the record, Roger Waters finally starts to sing. On Jensen’s right, Ian "Lay on" Macduff mouths along to the music, pale-lashed eyes closed. "Come on you target for faraway laughter, come on you stranger, you legend, you martyr, and shine…"

Fucking Floyd. Fucking talentless bunch of pretentious wankers.

Something catches in the corner of his vision. A tall maroon and brown blur through the frosted window of the classroom door. Someone knocks on the door and twenty pairs of eyes snap open, twenty heads turn to stare at the intruder.

"Come in!" roars Pickford.

The door thuds open, jerking the needle from the record with a comedy screech. For a moment, there's a terrified silence, broken only by the ominous hiss as the needle scratches mercilessly across the LP, then Pickford dives, arms outstretched to save his work of musical poetry. He cradles the record against his chest like a vinyl child, sliding it into the sleeve with a reverent look in his eyes.

"Yes? What? What is it, boy?" he barks.

The newcomer is still standing in the doorway. "Mr Tulliver said he’d told you. About me. I'm Jared Padalecki."

Padalecki, Jensen thinks, Christ, poor sod.

"What about you?"

"I'm in the Lower Sixth, Sir, Mr Pickford, but Mr Tulliver said for me to join your English Lit group. Um, is this the right room?"

"It is." Pickford finally raises his head, placing the record cautiously on his desk. "Well, what're you waiting for? Take a seat."

The newcomer, Padalecki, nods, gulps, and scuffles his way to the empty desk one row ahead and to Jensen's right. He's trying to make himself as unobtrusive as possible as he sits down, pulling out the chair without the usual piercing shriek, removing each object from his bag: exercise book, pens, pencil, ruler, brand new copy of Tess of the d'Urbervilles with exaggerated carefulness. He’s tall, taller than Jensen and Jensen’s one of the tallest kids here, but this kid is built like a high jumper, all angles and long limbs. He’s got a mop of dark hair, flopping over the side of his face and covering his eyes.

Jensen looks away from him. At the front, Pickford has finally stopped dicking around with his record and picked up his copy of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. He brandishes it with pointed disdain.

"Soooo, lit-er-a-ture. Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Not his best work, though certainly his best known. Who's read this then?"

A few hands go up. Jensen watches Padalecki glance around before tentatively raising his own hand.

"Aha. And who's read all of this?"

Most of the hands stay up.
"How about you, Ackles?" Jensen raises his head, meets Pickford’s eyes with his blandest, most inscrutable look. "Have you read it?"

"Yes."

"Right, right. And what's your oh-pin-i-on" Pickford extends the word, the vowels long and derisive. Jensen leans back in his chair, returning Pickford's sneering gaze. "It was okay."

"Okay? Praise indeed!" Pickford spins away to lean over Padalecki's desk: "How about you - our new resident genius?"

Jensen sees the new kid flinch at the epithet, hiding a rapidly colouring face under a sweep of dark fringe. "I liked it… it was, um, poignant."

"Poignant? I can see why Mr Tulliver wants you in this class,” Pickford says sarcastically. Some of the other kids snigger obediently.

Jensen rolls his eyes, crosses his arms on his desk and leans into it, resting his chin on his forearms. Cock, he thinks, you’re all a bunch of cocks. He glances across at the new kid. He looks uncomfortable, like he’s squeezed too tightly into the desk, like a piece of paper that’s been folded in half too many times and has sprung back into its normal shape. He’s writing, elbow sticking off the edge of the desk as his pen darts inkily across the page of his exercise book, his other hand propping up his cheek. The maroon cuffs of his blazer are dirty, blotted with ink, and when he looks up, he pushes the hair away from his face with a swipe of his hand, leaving a matching blue trail across his cheek.

Jensen bites his lip and looks back down at his desk, tracing the letters like runes carved into the wooden surface. Pickford fucks arses, he reads and he bites his lip on a laugh. Pickford’s still droning on in the background, banging the blackboard with the rubber to emphasise his point. A thick cloud of winter sun is streaming through the huge classroom windows and specks of chalk and dust motes dance in the shaft of sunlight. It looks almost beautiful.

Jensen raises his eyes to the horizon, letting them find that special faraway point. He knows where he's going to put the ball. He can feel it inherently, his eyes transmitting signals to his brain, his brain translating those signals and pushing them out through his synapses, down his legs to his feet. He takes a breath, sets his shoulders, and runs up to the ball. He feels the solid connection of leather against leather and hears the satisfying thud. The tee spins away and the ball curls elegantly into the air, arching, swerving, higher and higher into the grey sky. It starts to fall, and Jensen can see that the angle is perfect - just as he felt it would be - the ball dropping neatly between the uprights and over the bar. It lands on the grass and bounces away in skewed hops.

"Two down, one to go," he mutters to himself as he squats down to shake the next ball out of the mesh bag sitting beside his feet.
"Good shot."

He whips his head around, startled. Padalecki, the new boy in Pickford's class, is standing about five yards away, hands on his hips, chest heaving up and down with exertion. His face is red, his dark hair plastered to his forehead and neck with sweat. There are streaks of mud on his cheeks and chin, like he’s had his face ground into the mud in a scrum. He’s wearing the standard issue rugby shirt, except it’s far too big for him, the wind whipping it around his long thin body, making him look like a kid dressing up in his father’s clothes.

"It's a kick, not a shot," Jensen corrects him.

"Right, sorry, yeah, a kick. I knew that." He doesn’t sound convincing. He bites his lip, says, “You’re Jensen Ackles, aren’t you?”

"Yeah."

“I’ve just joined your class, with Pickford - for English Lit."

"Yeah. I saw." Jensen squats down on his haunches, pushing the tee into the soft mud. He balances the ball on top of it carefully, tilting the curved edge of the ball away from him. He straightens, runs his hand through his short hair, counts ten paces backwards.

"You don't mind me watching?"

"As long as you stay out of the way." Jensen doesn’t look at him, keeping his eyes on the ball.

"Oh, okay, yeah, course. I get it, you have to do your thing," Padalecki says. “I was - just before - it was that wanker, McKenzie, he had me running laps, for detention. I don’t even know why. I think he just doesn’t like me.” He stops speaking, puts his hands on his hips again. “Shall I stand here, or further back?”

Jensen glances at him, feeling the irritation bubble in his belly. “You’re fine where you are. Just don’t move.”

“Got it,” Padalecki nods. He bites his lip, watching Jensen from under a long fringe of dark hair. Jensen tries to ignore him. He looks at the ball on the ground, looks up at the uprights, the crossbar. He rolls his shoulders and takes a breath: inhale... exhale... He visualises the ball, seeing exactly where he’s going to put it, finding that faraway point on the horizon and the old lady in the imaginary stand. One more breath and then he moves: runs, kicks, heart thudding in his chest as the ball soars upwards. He knows instinctively that he’s got this one right, it’s another goodun. The ball tumbles, falls, clearing the crossbar with ease. A smile of victory slides across his face.

"Good kick." Padalecki catches his eye and grins at him.

Jensen pushes out a breath, grins back at him. “Thanks.”

The kid grins even wider, like he’s basking in Jensen’s approbation. He’s got a nice smile, all white teeth and dimples. “You’re really good at that,” he says.

Jensen shrugs, forces the smile off his face, schooling it back into its customary bland inscrutability, its safe look.

“Good job. If I’d arsed that one up, I’d probably be out here till dinner."
"Shit, really!"

"Got to do three in a row before I go back in," he says. "Lucky for me that was number three." He bends to retrieve the tee, shoving it into the pocket of his shorts. He twines the handle of the mesh ball bag around his fingers. "I have to go collect all those balls." He jerks his head towards the five balls lying under the posts over the other side of the field.

"Okay, I'll come with. That's if it's okay with you?" Padalecki says.

"Suit yourself," Jensen says.

Jensen drags the bag behind him, mud squelching under their boots as they cross the field.

"So – why do you have to do three in a row?" asks Padalecki. "Is it McKenzie being an arsehole like normal?"

"No. It's just what I do. The only way you get better."

He can feel Padalecki giving him an incredulous look, like he doesn't quite believe it. He shrugs; he's not going to explain himself to some younger kid. Padalecki shakes his head and laughs.

"You're insane! No one would choose to be out here if they didn't have to! Bloody rugby, I hate it! It's just an excuse to beat people up."

"Piss off! No it's not!"

"S'alright for you. I've seen you playing. You're really good at it. I'm crap and I hate it, so McKenzie hates me back and makes me run round the field because he's a bloody sadist."

They've reached the uprights. Padalecki leans against one of the posts while Jensen untangles the mesh string bag and collects the balls, dropping them back inside one by one.

They turn back towards the building in silence.

"So, um, have you decided what you're doing next year? For university? Where you're going and all that stuff?" Padalecki says, breaking the silence.

"Why?" Jensen turns his head to look at him.

Padalecki shrugs awkwardly. "Well, you know, this time of year, it's all everyone's going on about. You have to fill out your UCCAS form and all that."

"Not you. You're in the Lower Sixth," Jensen says. "You don't have to do it till next year."

Padalecki laughs uncomfortably, ducking his head, but not before Jensen can see his cheeks flush with evident embarrassment. "Yeah, yeah I know," he says. "But, um, me too. I mean I'm leaving when you are. That's why they moved me into Pickford's class, because I'm taking the exams a year early."

"Ahh. Wish I'd thought of that. Could've been out of this shithole already," Jensen says.

"They might not've let you go," he says, "you know, for the rugby and stuff, 'cause you're the best player. I bet McKenzie is already shitting his pants about what he's going to do next year when you've left."

Jensen doesn't say anything to that. He gives the ball bag a hard tug, hears it scrape against the
concrete as they come to the edge of the field. The wind has cooled the sweat under his mud-caked rugby shirt and his skin feels clammy and cold.

"So, where are you going then?" Padalecki says.

"To the LSE, I hope," Jensen says. "For Maths, I like Maths. Numbers are easy, no themes, no bloody symbolism. Just numbers."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Padalecki slants him a look, he’s smiling again, and Jensen finds his own face creasing into a smile. The kid’s got one of those faces that likes to smile. *Infectious*, he thinks. Then: *like a disease.*

"Then after I graduate, I’m going to get a job. I haven’t decided where or what yet, but as long as I’m filthy rich and able to tell cocks like Pickford to go fuck themselves, I don't care."

"That’s very decisive of you," Padalecki says.

Jensen shrugs. "I suppose. So how about you, where you going to go then? You seem like the kind of kid who’d have a plan, have it all worked out."

Padalecki flushes again. "Yeah, actually. I’m applying to the Slade, the Art School. Do you know it?"

Jensen gives him a look. "Just ‘cause I like rugby, doesn’t make me a total philistine."

"No, yeah, course not, sorry. Yeah, so, there. I hope. Or, if not there, then another Art School. In London. Mr Cross is helping me with my application. I have to provide a portfolio of work."

"So you want to study art?" Jensen says.

"More than anything else. Though my dad, he's mad for me to go to Oxford - Merton, it was his college." He turns his head, catching Jensen's eye, "I told him I didn’t want to. He wasn't very happy."

Jensen snorts, "Yeah, I bet."

They've arrived at the back entrance to the school. Jensen shoulders the heavy door open, dragging the ball bag behind them. Their studs ring out loudly on the floor as they tramp down the corridor in the P.E. wing towards the changing rooms. Jensen stops by the equipment cupboard and draws the key out of his pocket. He unlocks the door and throws the mesh bag of balls unceremoniously inside.

"How come you've got the key to that?" Padalecki asks while Jensen locks the cupboard up again.

"McKenzie gave it to me."

"Wow, he really trusts you, doesn't he?"

"He's a fucking idiot."

Padalecki laughs and follows him into the changing rooms. "Your dad must be very pleased, with you wanting to go to the LSE and that?"

"My father thinks the LSE is some sort of hallucinogenic drug," Jensen says.

The changing room is cold, the air thick with damp and sweat and Brilliantine, the floor covered with athlete's foot powder and clumps of mud and grass. Jensen wriggles out of his rugby shirt and tosses
it to the floor. He drops to the bench to toe off his boots. Padalecki seems to have gone quiet, finally shutting up at last. The kid really likes to talk.

Jensen bends over to roll down his socks and pull out his shin pads. There’s a new bruise on his ankle bone, courtesy of Cliff-Bentley, first choice hooker and a fucking psycho, born to play in the front row and definitely someone you don’t want on the opposing side. Unfortunately, he had been on the other side in the practice seven on sevens and Jensen had borne the brunt of his particular brand of vindictive sadism. He straightens up, wincing, bruised skin pulling. He balls up the dirty socks in one hand and goes still.

Padalecki is staring at him from the opposite bench. He’s half-naked, clutching his rugby shirt in both hands. His body is thin, his chest hairless, the ribs showing through his skin. There's a purple-blue bruise on one side of his stomach, and Jensen wonders if Cliff-Bentley gave him that one too. His eyes look dark and shrouded and they’re focussed on Jensen with an intense scrutiny that makes Jensen’s stomach flutter, goose-bumps breaking out across his cold skin and a scary roaring in his ears. With a wrench, Jensen tears his eyes away. He turns around, putting his back to Padalecki, and tugs down his shorts. He grabs his towel, wraps it around his waist and doesn’t look back as he heads for the showers.

He hangs his towel on one of the row of pegs in the shower room. He swallows, willing his heart to stop racing, running his fingers over the worn fabric of his towel to try to steady his nerves. There is no sign of Padalecki, no sound coming from the changing room and Jensen hopes that the kid has left without bothering to shower. He shivers again, he feels odd, weird in his own skin and his heart rate is refusing to get back to normal. He shakes his arms, twisting his shoulder blades, cracking his knuckles and focusing intently on the large blotchy patches of black and green mould above the shower heads.

He steps down into the showers and chooses his favourite shower, second from the end. He tweaks the ancient metal dial, hearing it squeak as cold water gushes out. He’s prepared for it, and he dodges out of the way of the icy stream, counting to thirty before it’s hot enough to chance going back under. Lukewarm water cascades over him, plastering his hair to his face and making him close his eyes as he tilts his head forward into the spray.

He opens his eyes and stares down at his feet, watching the muddy, scummy water pool around his toes. He reaches blindly behind him, feeling for and finding the grey, cracked soap. He works the soap with one hand, working up a lather good enough to wash his sweat-dirtied hair. He closes his eyes and scrapes his fingers against his scalp, relishing the sensation. He rinses the soap out of his hair and blinks open his eyes again. There's another new bruise - a scrape really - on his elbow, fucking Cliff-Bentley. He lowers his arm, swearing under his breath, and freezes.

Padalecki.

Standing right in front of him: strange, pale and naked. A lump forms in Jensen’s throat and he forces out a breath, hears himself exhale into the near silence, the only sound the drumming of the water and their own breathing. He shivers.

Padalecki is staring at him, his eyes locked on him, dark, intense and determined. Jensen stares back at him and realises distantly that his cock is stirring, thickening up, betraying him. Padalecki holds out one hand, slippery with soap-lather, and his eyelashes flutter, staring at Jensen, drinking him in. Jensen feels himself inch forward towards the other boy; the water pounds his back, like individual lukewarm nails. Padalecki takes another step, hand still outstretched.

Jensen gasps when Padalecki's long fingers curl around his cock. He leans in, looming over Jensen, topping him by a couple of inches, and pins him back against the mouldy, cold wall. His hand works
steadily on Jensen’s cock, tugging up and down, working him to full hardness and then keeping on going.

Padalecki jams one hand up against the wall, bracing himself. Jensen takes a breath and stares up at him. His bent face is in shadow, his hair a thick black curtain covering one eye. He’s biting his lip; the parts of his face Jensen can see are screwed up in intense concentration. Jensen lets his eyes fall closed; his cock is hard, so fucking hard. He brings his other hand up, groipes for Padalecki’s shoulder. He pushes and Padalecki stops abruptly. Jensen snaps his eyes open. Padalecki is staring at him, mouth parted in surprise. They stare at each other; Padalecki’s eyelashes are dark, sparkling, beaded with water, his cheeks flushed.

Jensen tightens his grip on the other boy, pushes, turns, and shoves him back against the cold, mould-flecked tiles. Padalecki lets out a gasp of surprise, but he doesn’t look away from Jensen.

Jensen grits his teeth, leans into Padalecki’s hard, bony body. He watches Padalecki swallow, the bob and roll of his throat. He groans again as Padalecki starts once more, hand working Jensen’s cock again, clumsy and impatient now. They’re standing close enough for their shoulders to brush together, and Jensen leans in, drops his forehead to rest against the side of Padalecki’s face. He can feel the other boy’s breath puff against his temple, his lips tantalisingly close to Jensen’s cheek.

Jensen shudders, and his cock spurts, his body rolling with the orgasm. Thin, translucent-white threads of come decorate Padalecki’s stomach over the purple-blue bruise. Jensen’s gaze jumps downwards, he watches Padalecki’s hand grab his own cock. He has big hands, bigger than Jensen’s, and his cock, fat and full, is just as big, proportional to his oversized, awkward limbs.

*He’s hung like a horse*, Jensen thinks and he wants to laugh at the absurdity of it.

He sees the moment when Padalecki comes, sees the spunk on his fingers, coating his fist and splattering his pubic hair. He opens his mouth to say something but Padalecki is already backing away, a small, shy smile twitching at the corner of his wet mouth and white drops of come - maybe his own, maybe Jensen’s - adorning his stomach. Jensen feels the corners of his own mouth twitch upwards in response, that infectious smile getting to him again. He turns into the rapidly cooling water to rinse himself off and doesn’t watch him leave.

He's still shaking.

The Sixth Form Common Room and Dormitories, or “The Farm” as the collection of buildings have always been known are separate to the rest of the school, across the other side of the senior quad, giving the older boys the illusion of superiority and separation from the lower echelons. Along with the different coloured piping on the edges of their blazers, the different colour combination to their ties, and the introduction of the strange but wonderful phenomenon of “free periods”, it’s the only thing that changes once the select few make the leap from obligatory basic education to the specialist world of A levels and the glittering promise of university.

Renovations transformed the old farmhouse and outhouse buildings - which used to supply the school with fruit and vegetables and dairy - into The Farm just after the war. The dormitories are
located on the higher floors, boys sharing in pairs, another distinction from the rest of the school where it’s five or six boys to a room, and the large Common Room, Study Room and Kitchen are on the ground floor. Furniture in the Common Room has been donated by various former alumni over the years, but it’s all well-used and peppered with gashes and cigarette burns these days.

The Common Room runs along a strict social hierarchy, based on seniority, status and popularity. The Upper Sixth have the end furthest from the door and closest to the radiator, and the most popular group in the Upper Sixth have the prime corner: the one with the record player – which means that they get to decide what the entire Common Room listens to.

Jensen can remember last year, sitting by the big draughty windows and listening to Eggy whine about the fucking disco music Denson and Matthews and O’Hanrahan and all those bastards were always fucking playing. This year things are different, Denson, Matthews and O’Hanrahan have left, and it’s Jensen and his friends who are in charge. They’ve made that corner their own, posters of Kate Bush and The Clash on the wall, as well as tearings from magazines of various pin-ups and random cool stuff to mark their territory.

Tradition still rules at Sanditon, and Thursday night means Top of the Pops, one of the only times during the week when the record player is silent. Most of the Upper and Lower Sixth crowd around the television after supper. As usual, Eggy bags the best seats up front, telling a couple of the Lower Sixth to piss off before Jensen slips into the seat next to him.

Jensen watches the chart countdown distractedly, not even bothering to groan out loud when it reveals that that fucking Grease song is still number one. It doesn’t get any better when the programme starts with David Essex as the first act.

"Jesus, this is shit," Eggy comments, dragging on his cigarette. "Why are the ones they get in the studio always so shit?"

“Hmm, what?” Jensen says. He’s not watching the programme, because he’s just noticed Padalecki, sitting in one of the less impressive corners of the room with that ginger kid that Jensen’s noticed hanging around with him all the time. They’re playing cards; their heads bent closely together, brown hair mixing with ginger.

It’s been three days since what happened in the showers. He hasn’t spoken to Padalecki since then, but his body flushes hot all over every time he catches a glimpse of him, and he can't stop thinking about it.

"Ackles, what the fuck is with you tonight?" Eggy says.

Jensen turns his attention back to him. "What?"

"What? What?" Eggy parrots. "It's like you've lost your bleeding mind. Admittedly this is a barrel of shit, but what's so fucking interesting over there?" He jerks his head towards the less fashionable corner of the Common Room where Padalecki and his ginger friend are ignoring the telly and playing their game.

Jensen's heart skips a beat. "Nothing, nothing. God, shut up. You're so fucking dramatic.” He snatches the packet of Benson & Hedges from Eggy's lap. Technically, they're not supposed to smoke here, but it’s one of the few rules in this place that the masters don't give a shit about.

David Essex finally finishes whatever shit song he was singing, and Peter Powell introduces The Buzzcocks.
"Ah! This is more like it!" Eggy exclaims. He gets up from his seat to twist the volume dial. A few kids make half-hearted protests but are silenced by the Fitzgerald glare and an eloquent, “Fuck off you tarts!” before Eggy sits back down again.

"You have such a way with people," Jensen tells him.

"Shut up, you sarcastic bastard. I'm definitely going to get this," Eggy says, gesturing at the telly with his cigarette and spilling ash over Jensen's trousers.

Jensen takes advantage of Eggy's engrossment in The Buzzcocks to sneak another look at Padalecki. Their card game has finished and Padalecki's shuffling the cards, which look ridiculously small in his big hands. Jensen stares at his hands, at the deft movements as he shuffles so easily. Jensen's crap at shuffling cards, he's still at the stage where he has to lay them face down on a table and push them around in order to mix them up, but he can tell that Padalecki's got the knack. He can probably do that fancy casino shuffle thing too.

He's good with his hands, Jensen thinks, and he feels a hysterical laugh bubble up from his belly. But it's true, the kid knew exactly what he was doing when he touched Jensen's dick, and it had felt amazing.

Padalecki looks up from his shuffling and glances across at him. Their eyes meet and Jensen feels a frisson rock through him. Padalecki's mouth crooks up at the edges and Jensen blinks, terrified. Does that look mean Padalecki wants to do it again? Does he want to do it again? His dick obviously thinks yes because he can feel it coming awake in his trousers.

He gulps and turns back to the telly. When he raises the cigarette to his lips his hands are trembling.

"Now, I'd definitely give her one," Eggy loudly proclaims.

Jensen looks at the TV. It's Blondie, not in the studio, but on one of those films they show. Picture This again, they had it on a couple of weeks ago. Eggy bought the single.

"And she'd like it, you can tell, it's in the eyes," Eggy continues. "Right dirty slag, that one."

"Is that a compliment?" Jensen says, raising his eyebrows as he looks at his friend.

"Fucking yeah it is," says Eggy. "Can't stand those uptight chicks."

"Chicks?"

"I'm definitely getting their next album when it comes out."

Jensen rolls his eyes and bends over to grind out the remains of his cigarette in the ashtray under his chair. He turns his head when he straightens up again, catches Padalecki watching him. Padalecki shrugs, smiles shyly, like he's embarrassed to be caught out.

Jensen turns his head around to face the TV again, feeling his cheeks heat up and his cock stiffen. He shifts in his seat, thanking God that he's not wearing his drainpipe jeans. He thinks about the look on Padalecki's face when he backed away from him in the showers, about how good his big hands had felt on his dick, and he realises with a warm, deep thrill to his gut that he wants to do it again.

He licks his lips, takes a breath, and looks around again. This time when he catches Padalecki staring at him, he smiles back.
Jensen is working in the library. He’s trying to finish his French homework, and wondering not for the first time what on earth possessed him to pick French as an A level. “You’re a clever boy, Ackles, you should keep your options open,” Old Man Tulliver had said, and so Jensen had, adding French to Maths, Further Maths and English Literature. It was a stupid decision.

He sighs, rubs his eyes and tries to focus on the book open in front of him, *Le Petit Prince*, with its deceptively childlike drawings and short sentences. 

Tu n’es encore pour moi qu’un petit garçon tout semblable à cent mille petits garçons. Et je n’ai pas besoin de toi. Et tu n’a pas besoin de moi non plus. Je ne suis pour toi qu’un renard semblable à cent mille renards. Mais, si tu m’apprivoises, nous aurons besoin l’un de l’autre. Tu seras pour moi unique au monde. Je serai pour toi unique au monde…

Jensen fists his fingers around his pen, writes: “The fox asks the Little Prince to tame him because he wants to make a connection with somebody. He wants to be special and unique to somebody.”

Isn’t that what we all want? he thinks, to be special and unique to somebody, to have somebody out there who gives a shit. He yawns, rubs his hand across his jaw, hears the gratifying rasp of stubble. He could try shaving again tonight. He raises his eyes from the page and looks out across the library again, gaze drawn inexorably to the same table.

Padalecki is sitting with four other Lower Sixthes. Padalecki is facing Jensen’s way, but his face is obscured by the more than adequate bulk of Kevin "Shithouse" Collinson-Wood, fellow member of Sanditon’s First XV, front row, and built like it, just like Cliff-Bentley. In fact, the two of them could be twins, all shoulders and thighs, muscle and brawn and thick 14-stone impenetrability, except Shithouse is not an enormous wankstain like Cliff-Bentley. The four boys at Padalecki’s table have their heads bent together, whispering loudly and stifling snorts of laughter into their hands. Mr Carter, the librarian, has already yelled at them once, and Jensen sees him look up murderously from his desk, shooting deathrays at Padalecki and his group.
Shithouse shifts in his chair, and Jensen catches a glimpse of Padalecki’s face, his wide laughing mouth twisted into a grin. Jensen feels a stirring low in his stomach and he curls his fingers more tightly around his fountain pen.

Padalecki pushes back his chair with a muffled squeak and saunters towards Jensen, then past him to the Ancient History section behind Jensen’s table. He’s not wearing his blazer and his shirt cuffs are pushed half way up his forearms. His tie is loosely knotted and the top button of his shirt is undone, his collar all skewed. He pulls a book off the shelf and bows his head over it, the movement making his hair fall across half his face. He’s all long limbs and long neck and big, big hands, so big that one of them practically covers all of the book’s back cover. He looks up and across at Jensen, the corner of his mouth quirks up like he’s trying not to laugh.

"Hello,” he says.

Jensen bites on his lip, on the smile that threatens. “Hello. What’re you reading?”

"Nothing in particular,” Padalecki says. He moves away from the shelves and leans against Jensen’s table, hip jutting towards him. His fingers trail across the worn wood, making slow intricate patterns. Like all of him, his fingers are really long. "Came to talk to you, actually."

"Oh,” Jensen says. Padalecki is looking at him in this expectant, watchful way, his lips half-parted. Jensen leans back in his chair, brings his hand up to rub the back of his neck. "You all working on something together?"

"Us all? No." Padalecki frowns, glances over his shoulder towards the loud, whispering group. "They're working on History. Roman military manoeuvres. Boring."

"Yeah. That’s why I didn't take fucking history."

"Me too. So, what're you doing?"

"French."

Padalecki pulls a face. "Poor you."

"Yeah."

"Yeah. So, um, tonight? Are we still going to, you know?” He quirks an eyebrow, leans closer, looming over the table, his voice low.

Jensen feels his mouth go dry. He forces a smile – his best, wickedest smile – and says, "Yeah. After dinner. Usual place."

"Yeah, okay,” Padalecki says. He grins, sudden and embarrassed, his face flushing. He back away from Jensen; his fingers drag slow-motion over the top of the table in his wake.

Jensen watches him slouch back towards the bookshelves and push the book back into place. Jensen stares at the curve of his spine through his thin white shirt as he reaches to pull a volume from the shelf. The library light is dim - there was another power cut that morning - and the low light picks out lighter, almost golden strands in his brown hair. He’s in profile to Jensen, his nose slightly pointed, his eyelashes a stubby dark fringe against the hollow of his eye sockets. Jensen watches him look up, sees him push his hair out of his face, their eyes meeting momentarily. Caught out, Jensen turns swiftly back to his assignment, pushing one hand under the table to adjust his suddenly tight trousers.
"That weirdo giant kid’s watching you again," Eggy says, nudging Jensen with his elbow, his spoon half raised to his mouth, laden with rhubarb crumble.

Jensen freezes, blinks at him. "What kid?"

"That new one, in Pickford's class. He keeps staring at you. He's always fucking staring at you. Reckon he fancies you, bloody arse-bandit."

Jensen follows where Eggy’s looking: the Lower Sixth table. Padalecki’s not looking his way now, his head bent towards that ginger kid. "What you on about, you stupid git?"

Eggy's eyes narrow in triumph, like he’s found a weakness. "No need to be so bloody defensive, mate."

"I'm not being defensive! You're just talking bollocks."

"Am I?" Eggy raises his eyebrows, shovels up another spoonful of pudding and shoves it in his mouth.

"Yeah," Jensen says. His eyes track back towards the Lower Sixth table. Padalecki is getting up from his seat, holding his tray. He’s not wearing his blazer again and Jensen’s attention is drawn to his arse as he leans over the table, the perfect curve of his buttocks under grey polyester, firm, round and smooth.

"You're looking at him now," Eggy says through a mouthful of pudding.

"Only 'cause you keep going on about it, Claude!" Jensen snaps.

“Don’t fucking call me that!” Eggy hisses.

Jensen ignores him, curling his fingers tightly around his own spoon. He can feel his cock fattening in his pants, defying and teasing him. Padalecki is still leaning over the table, his arse still on view to the entire fucking room. He’s saying something to that ginger kid, his neck all smooth and long as he tosses his hair out of his eyes. Jensen wants to bite that skin right there, on his neck. He remembers how it tastes; he tasted it only last night after all. And his arse, he can remember the feel of it under his hand, how he squeezed the firm flesh between his fingers. He wants to press his cock against the cleft of his bum and come right there, shoot his load all over the small of his back. They haven’t tried any of that yet; they’ve barely taken their clothes off, just rubbing off together in McKenzie’s equipment cupboard.

He gets up from the table with a jerk, ignoring Eggy’s bitten out: What the fuck's wrong with you now? Acting like a bleeding woman! as he strides over to the bin to dump his leftovers.
"You have to stop staring at me all the time," Jensen says as he roots around inside the locker, pushing aside the pile of threadbare towels and ink-stained sheets of paper. His fingers graze against the glass bottle and he lets out a relieved breath. Teacher's, and isn't that so bloody appropriate. Good old McKenzie, so pathetically, reliably obvious, the stupid prick.


It's a lie of course, he's staring right now, those long fingers of his fiddling with the togs of his oversized navy duffle coat as he stares at Jensen. Like his rugby shirt, the coat manages to be too short and not big enough at the same time, dwarfing his skinny shoulders, but only just skimming his thighs.

"Yeah. You do," Jensen says. "People are saying stuff."

"What people? Who's saying stuff?"

"Doesn't matter. Just stop the fucking staring thing. It's too obvious. Everybody's going to know." He twists the cap off the bottle of whiskey.

Padalecki scowls at him. "You're talking bollocks, Ackles."

He takes a long swig on the whiskey. It's harsh and sour and he immediately wants to spit it out, but he forces himself to swallow it, shuddering as it slides stiffly down his throat.

"No I'm not. You can't take your eyes off me."

"Yeah, right. 'Cause you never look at me - like in the library, you weren't looking at me then, right? And when we're together, you're always so unwilling!" Padalecki shoots back. His eyes blaze defiantly at Jensen, looking darker and shinier than usual. Jensen hasn't worked out what colour eyes he has yet, sometimes they're green, sometimes brown. It's annoying.

He scowls back at Padalecki, takes another long swig on the bottle.

"McKenzie's going to know it's you, you know, stealing his booze," Padalecki says. "You're the only other one with the key."

"Told you already. He won't get rid of me."

"Yeah, I know, he thinks the sun shines out of your backside! He thinks you're the best thing since sliced bread, well, you're not, you know. You're not all that." Padalecki breaks off, his face is all red, he looks really pissed off. "I bet you never even noticed I existed until I walked into Pickford's class."

Jensen shrugs. "I don't know half the bloody Lower Sixth, 'cept those who're part of the team."

"Not me then."
"No," he says. It’s the truth, he didn’t know Padalecki before, he barely noticed him. He was there, tall and quiet and in the background, but he never noticed him. He’s not sure why that is when he can’t stop noticing him now.

He drinks some more whiskey, watches Padalecki aim a kick at the mesh bag of rugby balls lying in one corner of the equipment cupboard. The sound reverberates through the cluttered, claustrophobic room. He’d like to be all aloof and dispassionate about this, he’d like not to care what this boy thinks about him. But there’s this nagging sensation low in his gut, an absurd, contradictory desire to take back what he just said, to un-say it, but also at the same time, to have it out there, to be able to hurt him with it.

_It’s the truth_, he thinks again, _I didn’t notice you before._

"I never noticed you," he says.

Padalecki raises his head and pushes his hair away from his face with that already familiar gesture. When he speaks his voice sounds bitter: "I noticed you."

"Oh, right, well, that’s not my fault." Jensen bends over to pose the bottle carefully on the floor. "Take your coat off."

"What?"

"Just take it off. That's why we're here isn't it?"

"To get off?" Padalecki spits.

"Right, yeah. To get off. You wouldn't be here, if you didn't want to. So just - take your coat off. Or piss off. Whatever you prefer."

Padalecki glares at him for a moment before reluctantly beginning to unwind his scarf and unpick the toggles of his duffle coat. Underneath it, he's wearing jeans and a jumper - he must've got changed after supper - the jumper is a shocking red colour and it makes him seem vibrant and incongruous against the backdrop of rugby balls, odd boots, orange practice cones and lacrosse sticks.

Jensen shrugs off his blazer. Unlike Padalecki, he couldn't be bothered to change out of his uniform after dinner. He throws it on top of a pile of practice cones, and approaches Padalecki, though it only takes four steps. They’re in a bloody equipment cupboard after all, small and constricted and stuffed full of rubbish that smells of feet and grass and damp. Padalecki bites his lip, watching Jensen with this wary, breathless, but still slightly pissed off look. It looks kind of good on him.

Jensen puts his hand on Padalecki’s arm, on the scratchy red wool of his jumper. He pushes him back against the wall, next to a pile of hockey sticks, and Padalecki pushes back. For a moment they’re locked in a clumsy push-pull-push, their bodies colliding and grinding together, hard and desperate.

"Wha - you..." Padalecki grabs onto Jensen’s tie, yanking him in close so their foreheads bump together. Jensen stumbles and somehow loses his footing, and then he’s falling, tumbling to the floor in a rough clumsy heap, and Padalecki is falling with him, his overlong, flailing legs catching hockey sticks and neon cones, sending all of it cascading to the floor. Padalecki pulls away from him and scrambles into a sitting position. His face screws up as he raises an elbow.

"Ow," he says, wincing. Jensen adjusts his collar, tries to straighten his clothes. He’s relieved he took off his blazer, if he’d ruined it, his mother would’ve had another paddy about buying a new one. He looks across at Padalecki, who’s still staring at him with that same accusatory look. "That hurt,”
Padalecki says.

Jensen rolls his eyes at him and grabs Padalecki’s foot, pulling him back to the floor in a spill of arms and legs.

"For fuck's--" Padalecki’s words disintegrate as Jensen pounces and pins him to the dirty, dusty floor, arms bracketing his head. He lowers his face to Padalecki’s neck, yanks aside the scratchy, woolly jumper and presses his mouth to the warm soft skin. He feels Padalecki gasp and arch beneath him, hissing as Jensen’s teeth graze the skin. He grinds his crotch down against Padalecki’s thigh, Padalecki’s belt buckle making metallic imprints in his stomach. "Let me, Jensen, let me…"

He can feel Padalecki’s cock through his jeans, fat and hard and insistent, and his own cock is just as bad, the blood throbbing through his balls, making them draw up tight. He rolls his hips down and Padalecki groans, “God, c’mon…” tugging him closer: one hand in his hair and one on his back, as selfish, needy and greedy as Jensen feels. Padalecki’s hand disappears from Jensen’s back and then it’s sliding somewhere between their bodies, slithering over Jensen’s fly and wriggling under his waistband. "Let me, Jensen, let me…"

Jensen freezes at the sound of his name. Those two syllables sound so foreign to him, rusty with lack of use. No one calls him that here. He gulps, stares down into Padalecki’s eyes. They’re dark right now, all blown and glassy, his lips half parted and pink and really fucking inviting. That rushing and roaring is back again, drowning out everything else in Jensen’s head. He leans down and puts his mouth to Padalecki’s.

Padalecki groans into the kiss. His hand cradles the back of Jensen’s skull as he kisses back with near desperation, their moans and groans dissolving into a flood of white noise in Jensen’s head. Padalecki says something, a rough and incoherent noise in Jensen’s ears. He twists his head to one side, away from Jensen’s mouth, pants out, “I want to."


The word is barely out before Padalecki is rolling them over so Jensen is on the bottom, the floor cold and hard beneath his back. Padalecki looms over him, bracing himself on all fours. He sits back on his haunches, straddling Jensen’s knees, and his fingers scrabble with Jensen’s fly. Jensen hears the snick of his belt buckle, the slip-slide zip of his fly, and then Padalecki is ducking down, and his mouth is... oh God, his mouth is on Jensen’s cock.

"It’s a fucking blowjob, he’s giving me a fucking blowjob, Jensen’s slow brain registers. But there is no more room for coherent thought, just sensation. He squeezes his eyes tight shut, every muscle primed, every nerve ending a spasm. God, oh God, he's quick, too quick and it's already over… he's coming embarrassingly quickly.

"Eurgh, that's." Padalecki raises his head, a tumble of dark, dishevelled hair, mouth glistening and sticky. "It tastes disgusting." He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Jensen stares at him, panting, heart hammering in his chest. "Feels fucking ace."

"Really?" Padalecki grins, toothy and delighted.

"Yeah. We should've done it before,” Jensen says. He curls one hand around Padalecki’s neck, tugging him down into a long kiss. It’s salty, brackish, tastes like come - like him. His hand creeps down, massaging Padalecki’s cock through the thick denim, tugging at the zipper, to free it. He fists it in his hand. He likes how it feels, smooth and warm and long.
“FUCK, ACKLES, JENSEN,” PADALECKI GROANS.

JENSEN HEART SKIPS A BEAT AT THE SOUND OF HIS NAME AGAIN. “WHAT’S YOUR NAME?” HE WHISPERS.

PADALECKI’S EYES FLY OPEN. HE BLINKS AT HIM, NOT UNDERSTANDING.

“YOUR NAME - YOUR FIRST NAME?” JENSEN SAYS.

“JARED,” HE SAYS, “IT’S JARED.”

JARED. IT’S UNUSUAL, BUT THEN SO IS PADALECKI, THERE AREN’T THAT MANY KIDS WITH A NAME LIKE THAT AT SANITON. MUST BE FOREIGN, WHICH MAKES SENSE, BECAUSE HE LOOKS FOREIGN, TOO TALL AND TOO LONG AND WITH THOSE STRANGE EYES THAT REMIND JENSEN OF AN ANIMAL, BUT IN A GOOD WAY, LIKE A FOX, LIKE THE FOX IN LE PETIT PRINCE. HE’S GOT AN UNUSUAL FACE, WITH HIGH CHEEKBONES AND Dimples IN HIS Cheeks. IT’S Strange and foreign and utterly compelling.

“JARED,” JENSEN REPEATS OUT LOUD, TRYING OUT THE FEEL OF IT ON HIS TONGUE. IT FEELS MUCH BETTER THAN PADALECKI.

PADALECKI SMILES, SOFT AND SHINY, “Yeah, that’s right.” HE DIPS HIS HEAD DOWN, KISSES THE CORNER OF JENSEN’S MOUTH. “Say it again.”

“JARED,” JENSEN SAYS AND HE JERKS HIS FIST UP AND DOWN PADALECKI - JARED’S cock. “JARED, JARED, c’mon, JARED.” HE SPEEDS UP, HAND PUMPING FURIOUSLY.

JARED GROANS LOUDLY, CRYING OUT AS HE COMES, HIS HOT STICKY RELEASE COATING JENSEN’S FINGERS. HE LEANS INTO JENSEN, RESTING HIS FOREHEAD ON HIS SHOULDER, VOICE TREMBLING. "God, that was… brilliant."

JENSEN PULLS AWAY AND REACHES FOR ONE OF THE SPARE RUGBY SHIRTS TO WIPe OFF HIS STICKy HANDS. JARED LAUGHS SHAKILy, WATCHING HIM.

"Any chance you got a fag?” JARED ASKS.

JENSEN NODS AND FISHES THE PACKET OUT OF HIS TROUSER POCKET - NOW SOMEWHAT FLATTENED - AND DROPS IT INTO JARED’S LAP. HE WATCHES JARED LIGHT UP, SLOTTING THE CIGARETTE INTO THE CORNER OF HIS MOUTH AS HE SHIFTS ON THE FLOOR TO DO UP HIS JEANS AND STRAIGHTEN HIS JUMPER.

"You want some?” JARED OFFERS.

"Of the fag that I just gave you?” HE RAISES AN EYEBROW. "You’re too generous.”

JARED ROLLS HIS EYES AT HIM BUT HE HOLDS OUT THE SMOKING CIGARETTE ANYWAY.

JENSEN TAKES IT; THE TIP IS WET, MOIST FROM JARED’S LIPS, THE LIPS THAT HAVE ALSO BEEN AROUND JENSEN’S cock. THE THOUGHT MAKES HIM WANT TO LAUGH OUT LOUD.

JARED TILTS HIS HEAD TO ONE SIDE, CONSIDERING. “The taste's almost gone now. It was disgusting, but it must get better. Else people wouldn't do it, would they?”

"Birds don't do it. They spit it out.”

JARED SHRUGS. "I wouldn't know.”

JENSEN CASTS HIM A QUICK GLANCE BEFORE TAKING ANOTHER DRAG. HE LOOKS DEBAUCHED, SPROWLED AGAINST THE WALL, HAIR WAY PAST TOUSLED, LIPS RED AND SWOLLEN, AND EYES STILL ALL SEX-GLAZED. DESPITE HIS EFFORTS TO PUT HIMSELF TOGETHER, HE LOOKS A MESS, AND THERE ARE SUSPICIOUS WHITE STAINS ON HIS RED JUMPER.
"What's the time?"

Reluctantly, Jensen lifts his arm, squinting at his watch. "Half eight."

"Shit. We should be going. I've got to finish an essay for tomorrow."

"Right."

Jensen stubs out the cigarette against the wall, picking up the butt and hiding it under a pile of old lacrosse uniforms. He reaches up and cranks the window open.

"Will it get rid of the smell?" Jared is shrugging on his duffle jacket again, fiddling with the toggles.

"Yeah, McKenzie's got no sense of smell anyway," Jensen says.

"What? Really?"

"Yeah."

Jared laughs. "How d'you know that - wait, I'm not sure if I want to know."

"You don't." He shrugs back into his blazer. "You should leave first. Then I'll wait and go."

"Okay," Jared nods, mouth twitching into a smile. "When shall we do this again?"

"Maybe Friday. There's no practice then."

Jared frowns, like he’s almost pouting. "Jensen, that’s four days away."

Jensen smirks at him, feeling smug. "What? You can't wait four bloody days?"

"Can you?"

He shrugs. Point taken. "Maybe Wednesday. I don't know. But I'll see you in Pickford's class anyway."

"Make it Wednesday. And," Jared hesitates, "I won't look at you so much. I'll try not to at least."

"Good."

Jared nods and turns to go, tugging the door open cautiously and peering outside. He hesitates then he turns around. "I - there’s something I want to ask you. A favour."

“What?”

Jared bites his lip, he looks embarrassed. “You can say no if you don’t want to. It’s stupid, I know.”

“What?” Jensen repeats, getting impatient.

Jared flushes. “I want to draw you. For a project, for my portfolio.”

“Draw me?” Jensen’s eyebrows shoot up. “Like--” he waves his hand in front of him-- “like naked?”

“No, God, not naked!”

“But you arty types draw naked people all the time.”
"Not here we don’t, not at Sanditon,” Jared says. He pulls a face. “Can you imagine what the parents would say? And most of the masters?"

“Yeah, good point.”

“I’ll do life class and nudes at college. If I get to college. But I need practice drawing people with their clothes on. And you, well, you’ve got a nice face, and I’d just like to draw you.” Jensen smirks, and Jared flushes again. “Oh, forget it, I wish I hadn’t bloody said anything.”

“No, no, hey, it’s cool! It’s okay. You can draw me. If you want.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why not? Might be fun.”

“Oh, okay, brilliant.” Jared grins, that strip of white teeth and dimples again, and Jensen can’t help but smile back at him, feeling absurdly warm inside.

“So, yeah, you should go.” Jensen makes a shooing gesture with his hands.

“Oh right, yeah.” Jared ducks his head out of the door again, looks around, pulls his head back in. “It’s all clear. See you tomorrow then.”

"Yeah… No, wait a minute."

Jared turns, expectant. "What?"

Jensen darts forward, hands cupping Jared's face, tugging him into a kiss, sloppy and exhausting and he has no fucking idea why he's doing it but it just feels really good. They break apart, exhaling into each other's skin, catching breath. Jensen nudges him with his shoulder.

"Go on. You should go."

Jared nods, biting his lip and smiling in a way that's almost shy. "See you later."

"See you."

The Common Room is crowded and noisy. Two games of cards, fifty plus raised voices and Eggy playing *Baker Street* on the record player again, because he hasn’t played that record enough since he bought it.

"Ackles, where the hell've you been?” Eggy greets him. He’s playing Poonton, crowded around a battered coffee table along with Anthony “Toska” Childs, Ian “Lay-On” Macduff and Philip “Percy” Grantby. Coins and cards lie piled up in the middle of the table. Toska seems to be winning, going by the pile of coins in front of him. He’s such a bloody card shark, fancies himself as Paul fucking Newman.
"That fucker, McKenzie had me doing extra practice," he says, though really why does he even have to justify himself? Eggy’s not his mother, thank God. He slumps into a chair behind him, kicks the back of Eggy’s chair.

Eggy frowns at him, jerks his head at the dark windows. "It's dark."

Jensen blinks at him. “Oh yeah, so it is. I never noticed.”

"Alright, enough fucking sarcasm! So, can you lend me a quid? These tarts are cleaning me out."

Jensen glances at the pile of coins - or rather, the non-existent pile of coins in front of Eggy - and rolls his eyes at him. “So, I’m supposed to lend Eggy Fitzgerald of the Hampshire Fitzgeralds money, am I? What happened to the family inheritance?” He widens his eyes in mock horror. A couple of the others look up and snigger.

"Fuck off! You know I'll pay you back. What're best mates for?"

Jensen huffs out a long pained breath, but he takes a handful of coins out of his pocket, drops them onto the table by Eggy's elbow. "That’s my entire life savings. If you actually manage to win anything I want fifty percent interest."

"That'll be the day!" Toska scoffs from the other side of the table.

Eggy grunts and pulls a face at Toska. Jensen leans back in his chair and picks up the discarded copy of last week's *NME*. He skims through it, trying to ignore the inevitable sounds of Eggy losing his money. At least Eggy will be good for it; his parents are very generous with the pocket money. They can afford to be after all, unlike Jensen’s parents.

Jensen can practically feel the moment Padalecki - *Jared, no it’s Jared* - enters the room, like a draft on the back of his neck. He glances up from the paper. Jared’s perching on the arm of one of the armchairs in the Lower Sixth corner, still wearing the same worse-for-wear red jumper and speaking animatedly to that ginger kid, his pale, talented, *oh so talented* hands shaping gestures, eyes all lit up and mouth laughing. So much for finishing an essay.

Jensen drags his eyes away, realizing distantly that he's scowling and that Eggy and the rest of the Pontoon players are staring at him expectantly. "Ackles, what do you think?"

"What?"

"What we were fucking talking about! The dance?"

He frowns. "What fucking dance?"

"With Queen Charlotte's. Weren't you listening to a bloody word we were saying?"

"What's this about a dance?"

"Queen Charlotte's, next month," Percy breaks in eagerly, "That’s the one with the really easy girls."

"Oh yeah.” Toska gives one of his patented salacious winks. “My cousin goes there, I’m telling you, lads, they’ll do it with anyone. They’re a right bunch of slags!"

"Excellent!" Eggy slaps the table making the cards jump. "You never know, you might even be in with a chance, Perce!"

"I wouldn't put money on it," says Toska.
"Hey! I'm sitting right here!"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say, dickhead. I've got a guaranteed pulling opportunity. I'm fucking deejaying all night." Toska says, sitting up with a smug grin. "So get your requests in pronto 'cause on the night, I'll only be taking requests from anything over a B-cup."

"Oh so Fatso Strickland will be able to request then?" says Jensen.

Eggy sniggers as Toska quickly amends, "Anything female over a B-cup."

"Christ, what the fuck did you do to Tulliver to get that gig?" Jensen says. "Though I'm relieved we won't be tortured with Dark Shite of the Moon courtesy of Cockford all night."

"That'll be for me to know and you tarts to guess about."

Jensen snorts, shifting to look at Eggy's cards and definitely not sneaking another look at Padalecki. "Eggster, you want to stick with those cards."

"What? No, I'm going to twist." Eggy says, screwing up his face and giving him an annoyed look.

"Oh for fuck's sake, don't fucking twist," Jensen tells him.

"I was thinking I'd really mix it up a bit for the dance. Not just all the wanky shite that’s in the charts," Toska says, playing a card. "You know, to get the fucking place moving."

"Really? In that case, I might consider gracing the event with my presence," Jensen says.

"The slutty birds not enough of an enticement for you?"

"Not him," Eggy scoffs. "Birds always throw themselves at him anyway, the lucky git."

Jensen smirks. “It’s tough being such a sex God. Not that any of you dickheads would know."

Eggy and Toska give him the finger and Jensen gives them two. He can remember the last dance with Queen Charlotte’s now. Caroline Stone, the girl with the shortest skirt and the tightest top and a haircut like Suzi Quatro, had given him a blowjob round the back of the gym. She hadn’t been as good at it as Padalecki.

He looks up again before he realises it, attention dragged inexorably towards the Lower Sixth corner. Jared’s already looking across at him. Their eyes meet for a fraction of a second, and Jensen feels his heart skip a beat. He swallows, forces himself to look away. He’s got to stop thinking about it, he doesn’t want to get another stiffy again. It’s fucking embarrassing, but that’s been happening far too much recently. Yesterday in Pickford’s glass, staring at the side of Jared’s throat, at a small graze on his chin, he’d got hard and he hadn’t even realised it. He’d had to button up his blazer to disguise it when the lesson had finished.

“Twist,” Eggy announces, reaching for another card. “Fuck! That’s - how much is that?"

Jensen leans over his shoulder to look. “Twenty three. You're bust, you stupid twat."
“You’re not supposed to talk,” says Jared.

Jensen sighs, tries to keep still. Being drawn is boring and tedious. He’s not doing it again, no matter how much Jared begs him, though Jared begging him would probably be very interesting. He looks so serious right now, biting his lip, his nose wrinkled in concentration as he glances between Jensen and his easel.

“You’re supposed to keep still,” Jared says.

Jensen rolls his eyes.

“And don’t do that,” says Jared. Jensen looks at him again, Jared’s looking amused, the corner of his mouth quirking up a bit like he’s having a laugh.

“How much longer?” he says.

Jared sighs painfully and puts down his pencil. He gives Jensen an unimpressed look. “It would be much quicker if you’d keep still.”

“I can’t keep still!” he protests. “I’m shit at keeping still.” He jumps off the desk, wriggles his shoulders around to demonstrate how crap he is at keeping still. Even when he was a kid his mum used to moan about him not being able to keep still. All this sticking to one pose and one position thing is making him feel stiff and cramped. He really isn’t good at keeping still.

“You’ve only been sitting for twenty minutes, that’s pathetic. Proper life models sit for hours.”

“Remind me never to become a proper life model then,” Jensen says. He walks around the back of the easel, just behind Jared’s stool. He peers over Jared’s shoulder at the canvas. The drawing is very good; it actually looks like a human face, like his face. It’s so weird seeing his face like that.

“Don’t you like it?” says Jared, looking over his shoulder at him. He looks a bit worried, nibbling on his lower lip again. “It’s not finished. It’ll look better when it’s finished.”

“No. It’s,” he hesitates, feeling uncomfortable and not sure how to put the question into words. The face is - well, it’s definitely him, but that person is good looking, like a carved marble statue, and the look on his face is strange, ethereal really, though that sounds really poncey.

“Do I really look like that?” he says.

Jared blinks at him, he looks very serious now. “Yes. You do. Your face is very classic, like classically handsome. You must see that, Jensen.”

“Handsome?” He stifles an embarrassed laugh. “That’s fucking stupid.”

“No it’s not,” says Jared, still completely serious. He spins around on his stool. His head is level with Jensen’s chest and he tilts it back to look up at him. His eyes are wide and sincere, his pink lips parted. “I used to watch you all the time, I couldn’t stop looking at you. You made me feel... things.”
He blushes, ducks his head, fingers fiddling with the edges of the paper. Jensen’s stomach flips over, he watches Jared shrug, knife-blade shoulders jerking up and down in his thin white shirt. “It was how I knew I wasn’t, you know, like everyone else.”

“What? Queer?” Jensen says. His heart is thumping, he feels a little bit light-headed. He can’t believe he said the word out loud.

“If you want to put it like that,” Jared says.

“Well, how would you put it?”

He turns away from Jared, wanders over towards the jaunty line of misshapen clay cups and ashtrays covering the display shelf underneath the window. Work by the Second Years, the notice reads. He could remember attempting to shape clay when he was in second year at his old school. He’d gone to the local comp back then, the same school his dad had gone to, though in his dad’s day, it had been a Secondary Modern. He’d been terrible at art, he couldn’t draw, couldn’t shape clay, couldn’t even do the piss-easy tie-dye thing with the hippy who used to come in, the one all the boys used to fancy. He’d dropped Art as soon as he could and then he’d passed the scholarship exam for Sanditon and Art hadn’t even been an option.

He puts his hand on the edge of the shelf, stares down at his fingers; his hand is shaking a bit. He hopes that Jared isn’t going to say anything else about being queer. He doesn’t know how to talk about this kind of stuff. It makes him sick when he thinks about it, about what it all might mean. He knows the words and the definitions, he knows what they mean, but he doesn’t want to think about them.

“I’m not like you,” Jared says quietly. “You’ve done it with girls.”

“Done it,” Jensen mouths to himself, it sounds ridiculous when you put it like that. He picks up one of the better clay mugs. You could probably drink out of this one, though he wouldn’t like to test it out, it looks like it’s never even touched a drop of water. The initials C.E. are scored into the bottom of the cup. He doesn’t know any of the Second Years except for Eggy’s little brother and the kid who cleans the rugby boots on match day. He’s got fair hair and freckles and he blushes every time Jensen speaks to him. Eggy, the stupid tosser, likes to take the piss, going on about the kid having a crush on him like it’s the funniest fucking thing in the world. It used to make Jensen laugh, but thinking about it now makes him feel weird.

“Haven’t you?” Jared says, breaking into his thoughts.

“Haven’t I what?”

“Had sex with girls. Last time at the dance with Queen Charlotte’s, that girl everybody was talking about. The gossip was all about you shagging her.”

Caroline Stone, Jensen thinks. She wasn’t as good as you. He doesn’t say that though, just turns around and shrugs, “I didn’t shag her. She gave me a blowjob.”

“Oh.” Jared swallows, his face falls and Jensen feels immediately bad. This is why you shouldn’t talk about this sort of stuff: someone always ends up getting upset.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he says.

“I don’t think I fancy girls,” Jared says. “I mean, I’ve never - when I think about it with them, I don’t.” He breaks off, his face is bright red, but he’s obviously going to force the words out whether or not they want to come out. “It doesn’t make me get hard,” he finishes up in a rush.
Jensen stares back at him. He’s not here to talk about this shit, he’s supposed to be doing Jared a favour, because he likes him and because he likes hanging around with him and because Jared asked him. He didn’t sign up to be a bloody councillor.

Jensen sighs, raps his fingers against the shelf. “You want to finish that?” he says, nodding his head at the drawing.

Jared nods stiffly, his face still bright red. “Okay, yeah, I suppose we should. Just, keep still this time.”

"Is there anything on your mind, Ackles? You seem distracted today,” McKenzie says, using his concerned and sympathetic voice.

Jensen stills as he feels McKenzie draw closer, moving to stand behind him, that habitual, slightly-too-close position that Jensen’s never managed to get used to no matter how long the pervy git’s been doing it. He feels McKenzie’s knee brush against the back of his calf and he resists the urge to flinch away.

"Nothing, Sir,” he says.

"Nothing at home? Family problems?” McKenzie drops his hand to Jensen’s shoulder, gives it a gentle squeeze. He doesn’t remove his hand straight away, but lets it linger there, hot and sweaty and heavy and making Jensen’s skin crawl.

"No, Sir,” he answers. He bobs down to pick up the ball, using the movement as an excuse to twist his body out of McKenzie’s grip. The man’s shadow falls over him, blocking out the winter sun.

"Because if there is anything, then you must know that you can come to me,” McKenzie continues, still not moving away. “I know Mr Tulliver is technically Senior Housemaster, but I like to think that we've developed a close relationship over the last few years.”

**A close relationship, Jensen thinks. Yeah, I bet you’d like to think that.**

He doesn’t say that though, just picks the first lie he can think of. “I’m just thinking about the game on Saturday. St Crispin’s are a really good team.”

McKenzie nods gravely. "Yes, yes, indeed they are. But you shouldn't fear them. You’re a very talented boy, Ackles, very special. I’m sure we will have them. Together. Remember: a positive mental attitude! And lots of sweat - good, hard, honest sweat!”

Jensen nods, hiding a nervous snigger as he wipes his muddy hands on his rugby shirt. He straightens up, takes a breath then turns to give McKenzie his most winning smile. “Um, Sir, can I ask you something?”

McKenzie blinks under the merciless onslaught of charm. "Umm, yes, yes, of course. Anything, like I said, anything.”
"Would it be okay if I miss practice tomorrow? I just have so much homework to catch up on and I think it would be beneficial for me to take a break before the big game." He pauses, blinks at McKenzie, batting his eyelashes and smiling at him and ignoring the sick churning in his gut.

"Would that be okay, Sir?"

He hates this, hates having to beg like that but he needs to see Jared and it’s fucking ironic that McKenzie is the one of the few people who would get that. He’d understand about touching another boy and making him feel good and having him look at you in that way. He’d get the appeal of big hands and wide smiles and dimples and the way their arse looks in their school trousers and their long fat cocks getting longer and fatter when you touch them.

"Um, fine, yes, I think that would be fine," McKenzie says, looking a little unsteady as he stares hungrily at Jensen’s mouth.

Jensen licks his lips, smiles again. "Thank you very much, Sir."

Tonight. After dinner. Usual place. Be there or be sexually frustrated for the rest of the week.

He slips the note into Jared's blazer pocket as they cram into the classroom, quirking his eyebrow in his direction as he slides into his seat. He’s rewarded with that sudden, blinding grin and he feels his own mouth slide into a wide smile. He’s momentarily relieved that Eggy is missing, talking through his university options with Tulliver instead of sitting here and watching Jensen act like a lovesick schoolgirl. For someone who’s ninety percent ego, Eggy’s surprisingly and annoyingly perceptive sometimes. Too perceptive for his own bloody good.

"Right! Who’s ready for some religious symbolism?" Pickford roars out once they’ve all taken their seats. He picks up *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and flings the book in Jensen’s direction. Jensen fumbles the catch, the book drops through his hands and skids off his desk onto the floor.

"Oho, our record-breaking fly-half has incurred a penalty. That’s a knock-on, Ackles," Pickford intones, looking gleeful.

Jensen closes his mouth on the threatening retort and leans out of his seat to pick up the book. He wipes off the dust on the jacket with the sleeve of his blazer. He can feel everybody’s eyes on him, and he looks up to meet Pickford’s gaze, his face its usual inscrutable mask.

"And your penalty is: tell me of an instance where Hardy uses religious symbolism to describe one of the characters in this ill-us-tri-ous work of fic-ti-on," Pickford says, pointing a finger at Jensen.

"Alec d’Urberville is often described as a diabolical presence, with his cigar and with frequent use of fire symbolism. The first time Tess meets him he’s holding a pitchfork, which is a common reference to the devil," Jensen recites.

Pickford rolls his eyes contemptuously. "Bo-ring. Far too easy. I would’ve thought our scholarship student could’ve done better than that!" He snatches the book from Jensen’s desk, spins on his heels dramatically, and stalks between the row of desks, waggling the book in the air, sweat patches
revealed to the world.

Jensen allows himself a look at Jared. From this angle, he can make out Jared’s left elbow and shoulder. His bony left wrist pokes out of the cuff of his blazer, which is too short on him. His fingers are stained with charcoal pencil. He must’ve been in the art classroom at lunchtime again, maybe working on the picture of Jensen. He’s rendered it in charcoals and wants to do a colour version. He’s been asking Jensen to pose for him again so he can get the colour work right.

He watches Jared push his hand under his cheek, cushioning the side of his face, long fingers sliding and tangling into his hair. It’s grown, even in the few weeks they’ve known each other, and it’s brushing the collar of his blazer now. He watches Jared turn his head, eyes following Pickford as he strides around the classroom. Jared licks his lips, and Jensen feels his stomach flip over with that familiar throb of want.

“I hope the rest of you can come up with something a bit more original than Ackles...” Pickford booms, pausing for effect like the ginormous ham he is, “…in the essays you’re all going to write for me.” The class groans and Pickford smiles, diabolically, “Religious symbolism in relation to the cha- rac-ters of Thomas Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles. I want at least four sides of A4. And stop groaning! You’ll be thanking me when this topic comes up in the exam.”

Jared huffs out a moan that is lust and anticipation and I-can't-fucking-wait-any-longer. He spits in his hand, a glistening string of saliva from lips to fingers. He looms over Jensen, shirttails pulling untucked from his trousers, his tie hanging free. Jensen grabs it, fingers twisting in the polyester, yanking Jared forward in a confusion of lips and teeth and bumping noses that quickly becomes breathless, slippery kisses. Jared groans into his mouth, hot sour breath on Jensen’s tongue. His big hands are everywhere, pushing under Jensen’s clothes, rubbing against his cock, the pat-pat-pat of skin on skin contact.

"Maybe we should have sex?" Jared’s face is flushed afterwards, a slightly dazed expression in his eyes when he turns to look at Jensen.

Jensen leers at him. “What d’you call that?”

“No, I mean, sex. Proper sex.”

Jensen raises his eyebrows, surprised. “Buggery, you mean?”

Jared flushes even harder. “Don’t call it that, that sounds disgusting.”

“But that’s what it is, isn’t it? My cock up your bum? You want that?”

Jared holds his gaze, his expression shifts, going a bit coy, knowing. “Yeah, maybe I do,” he says, he sounds defensive, sort of challenging. “I’ve read about it. It’s supposed to be amazing.”

He’s read about it, Jensen thinks. The thought is arousing, imagining Jared reading his dirty little books. Where would he even get such a thing?
He watches Jared tuck in his shirt, fasten the buttons and straighten his crooked collar. There's a mark on his throat, reddish-purple and bite-shaped. He gave it to him last time they were together. He wonders how Jared explains that to his dorm-mate, that ginger git.

Does Jared really want that? Does he really want to be buggered? He pictures Jared on his hands and knees in front of him, his arse in the air, pale round buttocks exposed, waiting for Jensen’s cock. He’s shagged girls - well, two of them - he can remember how it felt, moist and squishy and warm. Would Jared’s arsehole feel like that too? Would they have to use Vaseline like Eggy does for wanking off? What if his cock got stuck up there?

_Arseholes are for shitting._ He can hear his dad’s voice in his head, his face screwed up in disgust as they watch Top of the Pops, _all those fucking dirty poofers... don’t they realise that arseholes are for shitting. In my day, they’d get locked up going out like that._

He swallows back the rise of fear, the hot nervous sweat breaking out under his armpits. Jared obviously doesn’t believe that arseholes are just for shitting. Not if he’s being serious about this.

“We - err - we should have a bed if we do that,” he says.

Jared bites his lip, his eyebrows draw together into his thinking face. “What about the next family weekend?” he says. “I’m not going home on Saturday, my parents have a dinner in town. They’re staying at my dad’s club.”

_His dad has a club_, thinks Jensen. He wants to laugh; his dad’s idea of a big night out is a curry at the local tandoori and a drink at a pub that isn’t the one his Uncle Kevin runs. The Royal George by preference, if his mum’s with him and he’s feeling flush.

“And you - well, I know you don’t go home much,” Jared adds, looking apologetic.

Jensen shrugs. It’s true enough. He hates this shithole, but he hates going home even more. The small poky flat above the shop and the kitchen at the back and the way the whole place always smells of mouldy fruit and veg and turned milk.

“If I go home, then I always end up helping out in the shop. I hate helping in the shop,” he says. Jared blinks at him confusedly. “You have a shop?” he asks.

“My dad’s a grocer,” he says, feeling the customary twitch of embarrassment at the confession.

“Oh. Oh, right. I didn’t know that.”

“Not many people do. It’s not common knowledge,” Jensen says. He hesitates, then adds, “And I’d appreciate it if you didn’t spread it around.”

“I won’t! Of course I won’t. I’m good at keeping secrets.” He gives Jensen a look, wry and self-deprecating. “You should know that.”

“Hmm, yeah, I suppose you are.” Jensen sighs, tilts his head back against the wall, half-closes his eyes. He hears Jared shift closer, feels their knees knock together. He opens his eyes, rolls his head against the wall to look at the other boy.

Jared smiles at him, and Jensen drops his hand onto Jared’s long thigh, feels the muscle jump underneath his palm.

“So, Saturday then?” Jensen says. He can do this, and they don’t have to - not all the way - they
don’t have to do that. Buggery. He doesn’t think he’s ready for that, but they can do blowjobs and
handjobs and touch each other. All over. He’d definitely enjoy that.

“The other tossers are all away for the night. The entire night,” he adds.

Jared swallows and Jensen stares at the ripple of his throat, the slide and bob of his adam’s apple. He
wants to lick over the mark he left there; he wants to check if the skin feels the same as the rest of
him. He wants to see Jared completely naked. He didn’t look before - that first time, in the showers
- he’d been too shocked, and ever since then they’ve never had the opportunity. He doesn’t want to
get completely naked in this bloody equipment cupboard. It’s too fucking cold for a start. But he
really wants to look, he wants to see all of Jared. He wants to take his time with him.

Saturday is match day, St Crispin’s this time around, one of their big rivals for the Southern
Independent Schools Cup. His parents will be there, they’ll watch the match, his dad never misses a
game of rugby. They’ll go out afterwards, probably a fish supper, and then they’ll dump him back at
school and then...

Him and Jared and no one else. Eggy, Percy, Toska will all be at home. They’ll have all night.

“Yeah, Saturday,” Jared says, nodding his head.

Jensen leans in, puts his lips to the corner of Jared’s mouth and kisses him. Jared sucks in a breath
and turns his head into the kiss, their lips and tongues sliding together. They’re getting good at this,
learning how to angle their heads so their noses don’t get crushed. It’s slow this time, languorous and
easy, though Jensen knows that feeling won’t last. His body is already starting to heat up again, his
cock starting to twitch back to life. If he doesn’t break away now, they’ll have to go another round,
and then he’ll be late.

He pulls back, pushes out a sigh. Jared smiles wrly at him, cups Jensen’s cheek with one of his
huge hands. He leans in and nuzzles against Jensen’s cheek, his breath is warm and moist and
ticklish.

“Saturday,” Jensen says again, whispering the word like a promise.
“Penalty to Sanditon!” the referee bellows, blowing enthusiastically on his whistle. “Number five: not releasing the ball when on the ground.” He points at the opposition flanker and blows his whistle again.

Jensen groans. His hands slide over the muddy grass as he struggles for purchase. He uses his elbows and shoulders to push away St Crispin’s tighthead prop, another heavy kid of hefty proportions. Why do the big ones always fall on top of him?

Shithouse grunts and crouches down, hooking his hand around Jensen’s forearm. He heaves him back to his feet in a show of caveman strength.

“You alright, Ackles? You got to take the penalty,” he growls. “This far in, we should go for it. Scrum wouldn’t be any bloody use now.”

Jensen nods, blinks, trying to clear his head. His chest is heaving up and down, that last tackle really took the wind out of him, and he’s vaguely aware of blood trickling down his right thigh from an old, reopened gash.

McKenzie yells something from the touchline and Jensen turns his head dazedly towards the sound. He sees Barlow, the scrum-half, take the ball and tee from McKenzie and come jogging towards Jensen.

“Here,” the referee intones, pointing to the spot.

Jensen takes the ball and tee from Barlow. Barlow claps him on the back.

“You can do it,” he says confidently. “We got this.”

Jensen glances at the scoreboard. Hutchings, the skinny third year who keeps score, is bouncing on the spot, holding the number cards in his hands. 30 - 32 the scoreboard reads. If Jensen makes this penalty then they go ahead for the first time this afternoon. They could actually win the match. So, no pressure then.
He feels better with the ball in his hands. He can do this. He does this all the time, and this kick’s relatively easy. He’s practically facing the uprights, no need to angle the ball.

He crouches down to place it, hears the referee blow his whistle again. He pushes out a breath, stands up, and takes his customary ten paces backwards. He glances between the ball and the uprights, seeing the trajectory it’s going to take. He runs and kicks. The ball flies into the air and he holds his breath as it swerves and arcs perfectly through the uprights.

There’s a roar when the referee raises his arms to confirm the points. Shithouse and Barlow are the first to clap him on the back. Jensen grins and glances into the crowd of parents, masters and fellow pupils, sees his father celebrating, his mother standing beside him looking cold but pleased, and there – Jared. Jared’s smiling, clapping his hands together. Jensen stares at him, thinks about Jared telling him, I used to watch you, I watched all your games. He never noticed back then, but he’s seeing him now.

He waits in the car park for his parents once the match is finished, kit bag slung over his shoulder, hair as wet as icicles. It’s freezing, not something that registered when he was playing, but he’s feeling it now. Coldest bloody winter in years, his dad had whinged when he’d greeted him before the match. It hadn’t stopped him from watching the game though, which is something, Jensen supposes. He shoves his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket, and scuffs his trainers on the tarmac.

He sees Jared’s family come out of the school and walk towards a racing green Bentley. They’re all tall, even Jared’s mum and little sister. Jared’s mum is wearing a fur coat and it looks enormous, making her look twice as wide as she probably is. His dad has an overcoat and a pinstripe suit, people don’t wear pinstripe suits where he comes from, but it fits in here. Jared pauses with the car door open, one big hand resting on the door handle. He looks out across the car park towards Jensen. Jensen can’t make out his expression from that distance, but he can picture it in his head.

Jared raises his hand, gives him a jerky wave. Jensen waves back, he can’t help himself. He’s thinking about tonight, about Jared laid out on his bed naked, about being able to touch him, about Jared’s big hands and long legs and long neck and the way his sweat tastes when he licks his throat. He wonders if the sweat tastes the same in the crease of his thighs, or if it’s stronger, saltier perhaps. He swallows, feeling his whole body flush hot, his cock perk up in his trousers. He forces the thoughts away and watches Jared’s dad fold himself into the car. It’s probably a good thing that his family have such a huge posh car, they wouldn’t fit in something normal sized.

He watches Jared climb into the backseat. The two of them seem to spend a lot of time watching each other. Jared watches him playing rugby, he watches Jared during Pickford’s class. I can feel you watching me, Jared had said the last time they’d met. It’s very distracting. Jensen had grinned at him and shrugged, completely unapologetic. But that’s not the only time he watches Jared: in the common room, in the canteen, in the library. Watching Jared has become part of his daily routine.

Jared’s dad reverses the car neatly out of the car park. Jensen shivers and wishes that he’d brought his scarf and gloves. But they’re sitting on his bed in his room and there’s no time now for him to run
and fetch them. Christ, what’s taking his parents so bloody long. It’s not like they actually talk with any of the other parents here. His mum is too shy and his dad’s got that ridiculous chip on his shoulder.

His heart sinks and any warm thoughts Jared might have stirred up immediately melt away when his dad’s Morris Marina finally does come around the corner and draw up next to him. His father leans out of the driver’s side window and shouts: “C’mon, Jensen! We’re ready to go!”

He should be grateful that his dad didn’t bring the van. ACKLES FRUIT & VEG would be social suicide, though the rusty orange Marina is not that much of an improvement. His dad likes to make a point, though, play up his working class roots in front of the stockbrokers and bankers and lawyers and doctors and politicians and peers of the realm in the case of Eggy’s family. Jensen’s the scholarship boy, he knows it, everybody knows it, but he could do without his dad rubbing it in.

He heaves his kit bag onto his shoulder and climbs into the back of the car.

His mum turns around in the front seat and smiles at him. “You did well today, love.”

“Yes, he did,” his dad says, speaking into the driver’s mirror, as he pulls out of the car park. He sounds proud and Jensen can’t help his own accompanying swell of pride. Rugby has always been the only thing he and his father have ever connected over. “Three penalties and three conversions, and you made two of those tries. You won that game for them. Barry John eat your heart out.”

To Jensen’s dismay, they don’t take the usual route to his father’s favourite chip shop; instead, he swerves the car into the entrance of the Danubius Hotel. Jensen winces as the car backfires loudly when his father kills the engine. Jensen sighs and steps out of the car, pulling his jacket tightly around him. The car park is full of Mercedes and Bentleys, including the Padalecki Bentley. At least, he’ll get the chance to sneak looks at Jared all the way through what he knows is going to be an uncomfortable meal.

He trudges behind his parents as they walk into the hotel and wait to be seated in the restaurant. He stares morosely at his dad’s back. He’s wearing his suede jacket with the tassels, beige polo neck and brown and green checked flared trousers. It’s one of his best outfits and he thinks he looks the dog’s bollocks in it, except this is so not the Royal George, and he’s the only man over thirty in the place not wearing a shirt and tie.

Jared’s family are just being seated as they wait for someone to notice them. They have a good corner table, and Jensen sees Jared’s dad slip the waiter a rolled up note when he disappears. He didn’t think people actually did that in real life. He watches Jared take off his duffle coat and hang it over the back of his chair. He’s wearing brown slacks, a collared shirt and tie and a navy blazer. He looks ridiculous, like a mini but still huge version of his dad. His mum is wearing a matching tweed skirt and jacket and a string of pearls around her neck. They’re probably real.

“You should’ve worn a tie, I told you to wear a tie,” his mum hisses under her breath to his dad as they wait for the waiter to notice them.

“I’m not putting on a bloody tie. My money’s as good as theirs,” his dad retorts, not bothering to lower his voice.

Jensen shoves his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket and bows his head to hide the flush of embarrassment.

“We should’ve gone to that other place, you know the one, the fish and chip place,” his dad says, still not lowering his voice.
His mum presses her lips into a thin line and shoots her husband daggers. She puts her hand on Jensen’s shoulder.

“We promised him we’d take him out for a nice meal,” she says.

“I don’t mind,” Jensen says quickly, looking up at them. “We don’t have to eat here. We can go and get fish and chips, I like fish and chips.”

He can feel several interested pairs of eyes looking their way, and he knows that Jared will be among them, probably feeling embarrassed for him. He wishes they had gone to the fish and chip place; he could murder a bag of chips.

“Sir, madam, sir,” the waiter says, finally appearing. “Would you follow me, please?”

His dad shoots them a triumphant I told you so! look as they shuffle behind the waiter to a small table in the corner of the room, half hidden behind a plastic pot plant. They’re obviously being hidden away, but Jensen can’t spare the energy to be upset, he’s too busy feeling relieved. He doesn’t want to watch the entire restaurant see his dad eat a bowl of soup.

“How do we order wine? I feel like we should order wine?” his mum says as they take their seats.

“You can order what you like, love, I’m going to have a beer,” his dad says.

“I’ll have a beer too, Dad,” Jensen says.

“Will you now?” His dad gives him an amused, smirking look that’s uncannily like his own.

“I’m eighteen.”

His dad laughs. “Yeah, course you are, I keep forgetting that. I’ll get you a beer, son. Mary, order what you like. We’re celebrating. Oh wait - you didn’t give the boy the letter?”

“Oh yes, sorry,” she says. She reaches for her handbag, starts to root around inside it. She pulls out an envelope, it’s torn open, already read. “Sorry, love, we opened it already. Your father thought it was for him.” She gives her husband a reproachful look.

“Mr J Ackles, what am I supposed to think?” he says. “Still, well done, son.”

Jensen feels his mouth go dry. He reaches to take the envelope from his mother’s hand and pulls out the letter. It’s just a couple of sheets, typewritten, the London School of Economics logo in the right hand corner. He reads the first two paragraphs, then reads them again.

“Congratulations!” his mum says, her eyes are shiny with emotion, just like she looked when he passed the scholarship. “Our boy, going to university.”

“Knew there was a reason we let you go to that poncey school,” his dad says. “I know it’s not Oxford or Cambridge, but it’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

Jensen nods; his heart is still in his mouth, he can’t believe it. He rereads the letter.

“You just have to keep up your marks now,” his mum says. “Get all A’s. I hope you don’t mind, love, but I already told your Auntie Joyce and your Nan, they’re so proud of you. Your Uncle Kevin’s talking about giving you a party, but you know him, any excuse for a knees-up.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jensen says, giving her a faint smile. He still can’t believe it, he wants to read the letter again. He did it. He really fucking did it. Though, his mum is right, he does have to remember
that the offer is still conditional, he still has to actually get the grades he’s been predicted. But if he does do it then he’ll have a grant, and he’ll be able to get his own digs. Somewhere in the real city, somewhere that isn’t boring, shitty, suburban Welling.

He folds up the letter, slides it into his coat pocket.

“Where the hell is that waiter?” his dad says. “We need to do a proper toast. To our Jensen, the first Ackles to go to university.”

“*Heathcliff*, it’s me, I’m *Cathy*, I’ve come home now, so co-o-old, let me in at your window-o-ho-ho…”

Jared waves the sheet around, arms flailing and body writhing in a vague interpretative version of dancing. On Jensen’s turntable, Eggy’s 45 inch of *Wuthering Heights* spins around for the third or fourth time in an hour.

Jensen clutches the bottle of whiskey in his hand and falls sideways into his bed, laughing hard. His sides hurt, his throat aches. “Stop it! Stop it! No more!” he pleads.

Jared stops with his arms in the air, his hair is dishevelled, his cheeks are bright pink and he’s wearing a fucking sheet - one of the Fitzgerald family bed linens no less - over his boxer shorts, vest and socks. He looks ridiculous.

“Stop it, you look ridiculous,” Jensen tells him. “I’m not sure I even fancy you anymore.”

“Bollocks!” Jared exclaims and dives on top of him.

The bed squeaks as Jensen tries to fight him off, but Jared is a giant and has very long arms and legs and Jensen is really drunk. Jared pins him to the bed, his fingers around Jensen’s wrists, his legs curled around Jensen’s hips.

“You fancy me,” Jared says, looking pleased with himself. And drunk. “I know you fancy me, you’re always looking at me. You can’t stop yourself.”

Jensen looks up into Jared’s face, his flushed cheeks and dark eyes – they look brown tonight – and messy hair. He does fancy him, too bloody much.

The record finishes and the hiss-hiss-scratch of the needle skimming across the vinyl fills the room.

“Eurgh, c’mon, geroff me. Have to--” Jensen jerks his head towards the record player. “Eggy’ll kill me if I ruin his precious record.” Jared tilts his head to the side, regards the record player curiously, like he’s never seen one before.

“I’ll rescue it,” he says. He climbs off Jensen and the bed. He removes the record and hesitates with the record sleeve in one hand.

“Not again!” Jensen calls out from the bed. “Please, not again!”
Jared laughs and pouts at him. “Spoilsport.”

Jensen rolls his eyes and heaves himself off the bed. The blood rushes to his head and he stumbles, steadies himself against the edge of his desk.

“You’re so pissed,” Jared tells him.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are!”

“Least I’m not wearing a bloody sheet. You look like a dickhead.”

“I look ace!” Jared trills. He spins around, preens at Jensen, ruffling his hands through his hair to make it all stand up. He grabs the ends of the sheet and flings it around himself in a dramatic flurry, like a bad actor doing a bad Dracula impression.

Jensen wrinkles his nose at him. “You shouldn’t be allowed to drink alcohol.” He sinks back onto the bed, on his back. He reaches for the packet of Bensons and Bic lighter on his nightstand. He sparks up a fag, takes a long drag, exhaling the smoke upwards to cloud above him. He rests the cigarette against his lips, turns his head when he hears Jared move again. Jared takes a couple of steps towards him, trips on the trailing edges of the sheet and falls onto the bed. The cigarette jogs in Jensen’s hand, ash scatters on his shirt. Jensen curses and brushes it off.

“Sorry,” Jared says, making an apologetic face.

Jensen puffs out a breath and scrambles around to get out from underneath him. Jared is all skin and bones and sheet, but he still manages to take up a stupid amount of room. They shuffle around until they’re lying side by side on Jensen’s bed, sharing the pillow. Jensen leans over Jared to rest his smoking cigarette in the ashtray on the nightstand. He yanks on the monogrammed corner of the Fitzgerald family linen.

“Take this off,” he says.

Jared complies, flailing around in an attempt to get free. Jensen angles away from him, avoiding sharp elbows and long fingers and knobbly knees. Finally Jared gets free and flings the sheet aside, half of it landing on the floor, half on the end of Jensen’s bed. He’s in just his underwear now, while Jensen’s still wearing the jeans and shirt he wore when he was with his parents. Jared’s completely unselfconscious like this, and Jensen thinks again about that first time, about what Jared had done to him in the showers, and how much courage it must’ve taken for Jared to even approach him.

Jared steals Jensen’s fag from the ashtray, props himself up on one elbow and takes a long drag, staring down into Jensen’s face.

“You have such a perfect face, I want to draw you all the time,” he says.

Jensen feels his whole body flush at the compliment. Usually he doesn’t like people commenting on how he looks, it makes him feel awkward, and he doesn’t believe any of it anyway. It’s not really him, just outside, surface stuff, the kind of thing girls go for. But with Jared it feels different. Jared always stays stuff like he means it.

He makes a face at Jared, sticking out his tongue and crossing his eyes.

“Even when you do that,” Jared says, smiling in a fond sort of way that makes Jensen feel weird and soft inside. He holds out the cigarette and Jensen takes it from him, grateful for the distraction.
“You know, the plan was for us to have sex here,” Jared says, waving his hand around to encompass the bed, the room, Jensen... “Then you went and got drunk like a profligate.”

“Ooh, profligate, get him with the fancy words,” Jensen mocks. “No wonder they advanced you into our class. I bet your parents were so fucking proud.”

“Actually, my dad’s still pissed off with me ‘cause I told him I definitely wasn’t taking the Oxford entrance exam. He says I’m being selfish and inconsiderate. He thinks art is a waste of time and that artists are all parasites. As you can imagine, dinner was just lovely.”

Jensen turns his head to look at him. “Hasn’t he seen your stuff? You’re really good. I know sod all about art, but even I can see that you’re talented.” He stretches over Jared’s chest to stub out the fag in the ashtray and then turns onto his side, folding one arm under his head. It feels very intimate like this. He can smell the alcohol and smoke on Jared’s breath and see the pores in his skin. He’s got small moles on his cheeks and top lip, like little freckles, like he’s been splashed with tiny flecks of brown paint. The one on his top lip is very inviting, Jensen wants to flick his tongue over it, feel the tiny little bump of it on the end of his tongue. Jared blinks and Jensen stares at his eyes. Today, they look brown, but flecked with gold, his eyelashes look long, like millipede legs. He’s the one with the perfect face.

“That doesn’t matter,” Jared says. “Teachers have been telling my parents that I’m good at art for years. They’re not interested in that. My dad only cares about making money. He’d like me to follow him into the business, or if not that, then to become a doctor or a lawyer, something proper. But, I don’t care what he thinks, I’m going to art college whatever he says. And, well, the way I see it, we’re going to end up falling out and never speaking again at some point in the future. It’s inevitable. It may as well happen now rather than later.”

“What do you mean?”

“Jensen, come on, I’m not going to lie to them about what I am. I’m not going to pretend to be something I’m not. They’re already asking me about girls and girlfriends.”

“You don’t need to worry about that here,” Jensen says, “this place is wall to wall dick. Most of the tossers here don’t have a girlfriend, and the ones that say they do are all fucking liars.”

“Yeah, but what about when I go to college? Then later on? I’m never going to get married and I’m never going to have kids. It’s just not going to happen.”

Jensen makes a face. “God, who fucking wants to think about stuff like that now?”

“My parents,” Jared says with a shrug. “There’s this girl who goes to Queen Charlotte’s, she’s the daughter of one of the other partners at my dad’s firm. They want me to ask her to dance. They keep going on about it. They want to set up a bloody dinner with her family. Sometimes, I have this urge, right here.” He taps his chest with two long fingers. “Just to tell them the truth, to see what they’d say if I told them that I’m homosexual and that I don’t want to fuck girls and get them pregnant and produce grandchildren like they want. I want to fuck boys and that’s never going to change.”

Jensen blinks up at the ceiling. He’s not sure what he’s supposed to say to that. Jared likes talking and sharing all this big deep stuff that makes Jensen’s insides twist up into knots when he tries to think about it properly. He doesn’t have Jared’s certainty about what he is and what he wants in life. He honestly doesn’t know if he likes boys in the way Jared’s talking about, or if it’s just Jared that makes him feel like this. He’s been looking at other boys recently, since this thing started up with Jared, trying to imagine touching them or kissing them or wanking them off, like he does with Jared. He takes surreptitious glances at their mouths and lips and tries to imagine them on their knees with
his cock shoved down their throats. The picture does nothing for him, not even a twitch. But when he thinks about the times that Jared has done that for him, when he thinks about Jared’s lips glistening pink, and Jensen’s own spunk on his chin, and, the way Jared wipes his mouth off with the back of his hand, then his cock fattens up with a rush of need and want that’s fucking terrifying.

He pushes the thoughts away. This evening is definitely not going as planned and now he’s not even feeling drunk anymore. Still, Jared is here, and he’s in his underwear and they’re not going to get an opportunity like this again for a long time, if ever. If Jared would just bloody shut up for long enough they could have a really good time.

“We should put on some music,” he says.

He climbs over Jared and onto the floor. His head feels heavy and he can feel the blood beating loudly, drumming against the inside of his skull. He kneels on the carpet, pulls out the box of his and Eggy’s records from under his desk.

“What do you like?” he asks, turning his head to look at Jared.

Jared sits up, leaning back against the wall. He brings up one knee, rests his chin on it, smiles lazily at him. Jensen stares at his long legs, at the dark thick hair on his legs, not coarse like his father’s, but finer. He wants to run his fingers over it. Sometimes the urge to touch Jared is just overwhelming.

“Come here,” Jared says, crooking his finger at Jensen.

Jensen stares back at him, licks his lips. He watches Jared’s eyes dart to his mouth, his expression getting more intense, his eyes darker.

“Come here,” Jared says again.

Jensen grabs hold of the hem of his shirt, yanks it up and over his head, and throws it over his shoulder towards Eggy’s bed.

He watches the corners of Jared’s mouth turn upwards, that lazy smile again. He shuffles forward on his knees, puts his hand on Jared’s bare foot, bracelets his fingers around Jared’s ankle. The hairs on Jared’s calves feel soft under his fingers and he strokes his thumb over Jared’s ankle bone. There’s an old bruise there, faded to yellow now and he circles it with the pad of his thumb. He looks up at him through his eyelashes, sees the slip-slide of Jared’s throat when he gulps.

“Jensen,” Jared mutters, low and throaty, then again, “Jensen.”

Jensen smiles slowly, caresses his fingers over the narrow bones of Jared’s foot. Jared’s leg shakes and he arches his foot into Jensen’s hand. Jensen drags his hand slowly up Jared’s leg, skimming his fingers up the back of his calf, the hairs sitting up fine and static in his wake. He slips his fingers into the soft damp hollow behind Jared’s knee, feels Jared shudder, moan, say, “Jensen, you’re tickling me, stop,” in a low, throaty voice. But Jensen doesn’t stop, just shuffles up on his knees, until his hips are pressing up against the hard edge of the mattress. He has a perfect view of Jared’s cock from this angle, and he can see it take shape, getting thick and fat in Jared’s underpants, until it’s straining at the fabric, a small wet patch forming where the head pushes against the thin material. The sight makes a shiver of heat ripple through him and he feels his own cock stiffen.

Jared slides his foot off the edge of the mattress, hooks it around Jensen’s back, pulling him into the V of his thighs. Jared rears up and over him, cups the side of Jensen’s face with one huge hand. He bites his lips, stares down into Jensen’s eyes, dragging his thumb tenderly over Jensen’s cheekbone. Jensen closes his eyes, he can’t look at Jared like this, he feels so exposed. He hears the wince and
creak of the bedsprings and then both Jared’s hands are cradling his face, tilting his head back as Jared leans down to kiss him.

“What the bloody hell... Ackles, you tart! You in there?”

Jensen jerks away from Jared so fast he stumbles, falls over, head hitting the edge of Eggy’s bed. He swears, whips his head up, blinking at the head rush.

The door handle is rattling up and down, and on the other side, Eggy is calling his name. “Unbolt the fucking door! What you doing in there? You better not be wanking off in my bed again!”

“Shit,” Jensen curses. He stumbles to his knees, reaches to scoop up his shirt from Eggy’s bed. On his bed, Jared is looking around him wildly, trying to find his clothes. “Here!” Jensen snatches up Jared’s discarded clothes and throws them at him. They scatter on the bed and floor and Jensen watches Jared tug on the brown corduroy trousers and green t-shirt before he staggers to his feet and goes to open the door.

“I’m coming! Stop fucking doing that! You’ll break the handle!” he snaps as he shoots the bolt back. He darts a look back at Jared before he unfastens the second bolt. Jared is sitting perched upright on the edge of Jensen’s bed, hands folded in his lap and looking as guilty as sin.

Oh well, there’s not much he can do about that now.

The door thrusts open and Eggy comes barrelling in, carrying his satchel and a couple of LP’s under his arm. He dumps the bag on the floor and turns to face Jensen, and then, Jared.

“What the bloody hell’s going on in here?” he asks. Then more suspiciously: “Who the fuck is he?” Jensen rolls his eyes at him. “You know who he is, he’s in Pickford’s class with us.”

“Oh, yeah. Didn’t realise you two were so matey.” He raises his eyebrows at Jensen.

Jensen sighs and leans down to pick up the half-drunk bottle of whiskey from its spot by his own bed where he dropped it earlier. “We were drinking.”

“You nick that off that fucker McKenzie again?”

“Who else?”

Eggy makes a gimme gesture with his fingers and Jensen hands the bottle over.

“So, what’s your name, tall kid?” Eggy says, taking a swig, and eyeing Jared with the kind of superciliousness that would do his father, Sir Gerald Fitzgerald proud.

“Jared Padalecki,” Jared says.

“Jesus. Really?” Eggy says, making a face and taking another long swig. He swishes the liquid around his mouth before swallowing. “What kind of a fucking name is that?”

“Polish,” says Jared, a shade defensively. “My granddad was a refugee.”

“On the run from the Nazis, was he? So you’re a yid.”

“Shut up,” Jensen tells him. “You’re acting like a twat.” He pries the bottle from Eggy’s hands again and drops down onto Eggy’s bed.
“My granddad’s Jewish,” Jared says, “but I’m not.”

Jensen glances surreptitiously at Jared; he looks about as uncomfortable as it’s possible for someone to look. He’s still sitting on the edge of the bed, curled over and into himself with his hands on his knees, trying to hide the fact that his trousers are still unbuttoned. He thinks about the Jared who walked into the shower with him, the one who’d had the balls to actually touch him, to start all this. Jared doesn’t look like that person now, he looks scared, and the look on his face makes Jensen’s chest feel heavy.

“I should go,” Jared says quietly.

“Yeah, you should,” Eggy says.

Jensen stretches out with his foot and kicks the back of Eggy’s leg. “Stop being such a twat. I invited him here to hang around, we were working on our essays for Cockford. I thought you’d be out all night. Why the fuck are you here anyway?”

“Had a row with the crumblies,” Eggys answers.

Behind Eggy, Jensen sees Jared fumble with his trousers, doing up his flies. He stands up when he’s done and looks around for his shoes.

“Well, I’ll be going then,” he says lamely.

Jensen nods at him. “Yeah, okay.”

“Hey, don’t forget this. This is yours, right?” Eggy snatches up Jared’s sketchpad where he left it on Jensen’s desk. He looks down at the drawing there and Jensen feels his breath catch. He glances across at Jared, sees the flush in his cheeks, the ripple up and down of his adam’s apple as he swallows nervously. The soft swish of Eggy flicking through Jared’s sketchpad seems to echo in the room.

Eggy closes the pad and holds it out to Jared, his expression is suspicious, contemptuous even and Jensen feels his heart sink. “Very impressive,” Eggy says, the sneering obvious in his voice, “what a great talent you have.”

Jared blushes and grabs the sketchpad out of Eggy’s hands, cradles it against his chest, glaring defiantly at Eggy. He turns to look past Eggy, at Jensen, still sitting on the bed like a coward.

“Bye then, Je - Ackles,” he says, and Jensen feels his heart skip a beat at the near miss. No one calls him Jensen here, not even Eggy and he’s supposed to be his best mate.

“Bye,” he says, watching Jared bend to pick up his shoes and back out of the room.

“He definitely fancies you,” Eggy says as the door closes behind Jared. He’s speaking loudly enough for Jared to hear it, which is no doubt deliberate. “First class poofter, that one. You can see it.” He waves two fingers in front of his face. “It’s in the eyes.”

“What absolute bollocks you talk,” Jensen says.

“I can’t believe you don’t bloody see it too. Did you know he’s got drawings of you? Tons of them - all of you - he’s obsessed with you, the disgusting pervert. Like that little kid, whatisname--”

“It’s for an Art project,” Jensen interrupts him.
“What?”

“The drawings, dickhead. They’re for an art project. We got talking after P.E. one time. He’s alright, you know. He said he needed to draw someone for his art school application, I said he could draw me. That was me volunteering, so you’re talking shite. As usual.”

“Thought you were working on an essay?”

“We were, as well,” he answers hastily.

“Right. So you’ve been working on an essay, drinking and posing for him? How fucking nice and cosy and not at all queer of you.”

“Oh give it a rest,” Jensen says. He rolls off Eggy’s bed, cradling the bottle under his arm as he shuffles towards his own bed. He drops back onto his bed, rolls his head into the pillow. It smells a bit like Jared and he tries not to inhale it. He still feels jittery, nervous and not quite right. Beside him, tucked under his armpit, the bottle sloshes with his squirming, the sound making him feel queasy. He reaches for the packet of cigarettes on his nightstand. He pops one in his mouth, lights up. He closes his eyes and wishes Eggy would just leave him the fuck alone.

“You want to watch The Sweeney?” Eggy says.

Jensen turns his head to look at him. He knows this is Eggy’s olive branch. Fitzgeralds don’t actually say sorry after all and they never admit to being a dick.

“Yeah, fine, alright, then,” he says.
Jensen didn’t start at Sanditon until his Fourth Year, his first year of O-levels. Sometimes it feels like he missed out on a lot, but most of the time he’s grateful for it.

“I hated him,” Jared says feelingly. They’re walking the perimeter of the playing fields, just the two of them. It’s Saturday and most of the boys are out with their families. Jared’s family couldn’t come, so Jensen told his parents not to come too. He’s given up lying to himself about Jared, he wants to spend time with him. It’s not something he’s willing to deny anymore.

He glances across at Jared. Jared’s eyes are cold, a muscle twitching at his jaw. “I know it’s been years now, and I should get over it, but I still think about it. And when I do – it – it makes me feel dirty.”

Jensen’s heard about what used to go on. First years are fair game for the senior boys. Or at least they used to be, back in the good old bad old days. Before the school finally got its act together and tried to stamp it all out, getting first class tosspots like Pickford in to replace the older, more handsier masters. Not that Pickford’s much of an improvement, wanting to discuss the hidden meanings of the second side of *Wish You Were Here* rather than actually teach them anything that might help them pass their exams. Some of the old guard have managed to stick around of course, McKenzie for one.

“I had to polish his shoes and do his fucking laundry,” Jared says bitterly, “it was fucking archaic. And he’d stand over me, watching me sort it afterwards. Then he’d—“ he gestures jerkily with his hand—“you know, he’d slide up behind me and press his cock against my arse until he brought himself off. I hated it, I hated it so fucking much, Jensen. I used to dream about all the different ways I could kill the bastard. He must’ve been our age then, seventeen, eighteen maybe. And he was doing that to a fucking eleven year old.” He breaks off, stops walking. He clears his throat, and Jensen can hear the hitch in his breath. When he raises his head his eyes are shiny. “I remember, after the Christmas holiday, I was so desperate not to come back here, I drank all the cough medicine in the bathroom cabinet. I was really sick, threw up everywhere, but I got better unfortunately. Afterwards, after he’d left, when I started realizing things about – about me, I thought he’d done it to me. He’d poisoned me in some way.”
“That’s not possible,” Jensen says softly. “You know that, right? It doesn’t work like that.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m not fucking stupid,” Jared says. “But still. For years—” He turns his head, putting his face in profile to Jensen. “When I used to toss off, I’d end up thinking about him. I couldn’t help it. I’d try so hard to think about other things, but he’d always creep in there.” He turns back to Jensen, their eyes meeting. “It’s different now. Now I just think about you. All the bloody time, I think about you.”

Jensen huffs out a breath, a shy sort of a smile. “Yeah. I know how that goes.”

He nudges Jared with his elbow and Jared nudges him back. When he glances up at Jared again, he’s relieved to see he’s smiling once more. Jared’s face is made for smiling. He likes seeing Jared smile.

“So, yeah, that’s my sad little story,” says Jared with a self-deprecating eye-roll. “You must be relieved that you weren’t here then. They’d all have been fighting over you.”

Jensen snorts. “Right. Lucky me.”

They walk on in silence. Jensen slides his packet of Benson & Hedges out of his pocket, offers it to Jared.

“No thanks. I’ve got these,” Jared says. He fishes a packet of Walker’s salt and vinegar crisps out of one of his voluminous duffle coat pockets and waves it at Jensen.

Jensen shakes his head and lights up his cigarette while Jared opens his crisps. They keep on walking, the mud squelching under Jensen’s trainers, Jared’s crisp packet crinkling each time he shoves his hand inside.

Jensen thinks about some of the first year boys. He’s never really noticed any of them. They just seem to scurry about, looking small and frightened and insignificant. He can’t imagine ever wanting to touch any of them the way Jared’s just described, though from what Jared’s just said and what he’s heard from Eggy and Toska and the rest of them, that kind of thing was quite normal a few years ago. It’s funny how things seem to have gone entirely in the opposite direction now. Anything that can be remotely construed as homosexual is seized upon and mocked and exploited with malicious relish. It’s why they have to be so careful.

“So, why Jensen?” Jared says.

“What?” Jensen blinks and turns his head back towards Jared, jolted from his thoughts.

“Your name. I was just wondering. Where does Jensen come from? Is it a family thing?”

“Don’t know. I think my mum just liked it,” he says. “She wanted something different.”

“Oh, so you’re not Swedish or something like that?”

Jensen snorts. “No! My parents were both born in lovely South East London. Though my dad’s labouring under the delusion that he’s actually Welsh. He was evacuated there during the war, best time of his life he always says. My uncle says that when they came back to London they all had Welsh accents. Personally, I just think it’s an excuse for him to support Wales. He’s such a glory-hunter.”

“I’ll pretend I know what that means,” says Jared.

“Rugby,” says Jensen. “Even you must have noticed that Wales win a lot. Usually against England.”
Jared makes a face. “Yuck, rugby.”

Jensen laughs. “Come on, you can’t hate it that much. You told me you’ve never missed a match this year.”

“Jensen, I’ve never missed a match this year because of you. Because I like watching you get all dirty and sweaty,” Jared says with a smirk, “I have no idea what’s going on most of the time.”

Jensen snorts again at him, but he’s blushing and he feels pleased, all warm and nice inside. Jared grins at him, dimples popping in his cheeks. Jensen can see the small mashed-up bits of crisp stuck to Jared’s teeth and he still feels that familiar urge to kiss him, to even taste the salt and vinegar on his breath. He wonders if this means that they’re in love. Not giving a shit about bits of food in the other person’s teeth seems to indicate some depth of feeling. He doesn’t think he’s in love with Jared, but then he’s never been in love with anyone before so he doesn’t know how it’s supposed to work, and books and telly aren’t exactly reliable.

He knows that he thinks about Jared constantly, that Jared fills his dreams and his daydreams. He knows that hearing Jared tell him that stuff before made him feel hot and angry inside on his behalf, like he wanted to find the sick, twisted bastard who did that to Jared and make him hurt. He knows that he wants to touch Jared all the time in a way that makes his body feel constantly like he’s running a temperature. He likes how Jared sounds when he speaks, he likes how he smiles- *infectious* - he likes the stupid clothes that don’t fit him properly, like the enormous duffle coat he’s wearing now that makes him look like bloody Paddington Bear.

He leans in, shoves Jared with his shoulder. Jared staggers a bit, gives him a shocked look, and Jensen grins at him. “Nearly got you,” he says.

“No you didn’t.”

Jensen draws on his fag, sucks up the last of the smoke. He flicks it away, watches it fizzle and die on the soft wet mud.

“Jensen?”

“Yeah?” He glances up and over at Jared. He’s finished eating his crisps and is busy folding the packet up into a neat square and then a triangle, sliding it into his pocket when he’s done. He’s such a good boy, living the Keep Britain Tidy campaign.

“I got an interview. With the Slade.”

“Really? That’s great news.” He hesitates on Jared’s worried expression. “Isn’t it?”

“I suppose so. I haven’t told my dad yet. It’s in January.” He frowns. “Do you think that’s a good sign? That they want to wait until then to see me? You’d think they’d want it all sorted out before Christmas. Most people have their offers already. You have your offer already.”

“I don’t think that matters,” Jensen says with a shrug. “It’s a different sort of college. I don’t think you should read anything into it. They liked your stuff enough to give you an interview. That’s really great news. It’s what you want, right?”

“Yeah, yeah, it is.” Jared nods. He glances at Jensen. “You know this means that I need to finish that painting of you. I need something else to bring to them.”

Jared’s already got sketches, charcoal and coloured pencil, he’s done a whole study of Jensen, but he’s been nagging Jensen to turn it all into a real painting – with oils. Jensen’s been trying to forget
about the whole thing, it's embarrassing enough already, he really doesn't want to become a bloody oil painting.

“But why does that something else have to be my face?” he groans.

“I like your face,” Jared says, and Jensen feels warm and soft inside again. He flicks Jared a look, he’s watching him, lip caught between his teeth, twin patches of pink on his cheeks. “You know if we both – if I get into the Slade and you get into the LSE then we’ll both be in London and the campuses are really close.”

“I know.”

He knows what Jared wants him to say, *we could hang around together, we could see each other free from this place, we could, we could, we could…*

Jared’s waiting for him to say it, to acknowledge what it all could mean, but he doesn’t know what to say. The way he feels right now, he doesn’t want to stop this whatever it is they have between them, the thought of letting go of it and never being able to touch Jared again makes him feel physically sick. But they can’t really be together like *that*. He knows that. His dad – God – his dad would go bloody mad. And Jared might be into the whole idea of telling his parents, but Jensen definitely isn’t. He doesn’t even know if he’s bent like that anyway.

“So, you going to the dance on Saturday then?” he says instead.

"You can't go dressed like that! Pickford'll do his nut!" Percy appears in the mirror behind Jensen, his eyes wide with outrage and fingers fiddling nervously with his tie.

"Pickford can go fuck himself," Jensen says. He meets Percy's eyes in the mirror, ruffles his hands through his short hair, trying to work it into some sort of a style. "Anyway, I'm wearing a jacket for fuck's sake!" He straightens the lapels of his leather jacket, smirks at his reflection.

"That doesn’t count," Percy says, sounding almost agonised. "They won't even let you through the door. You'll miss the whole thing!"

"I'm not planning on going through the front door." Jensen smiles dangerously at his reflection and pushes past Percy into his room where Eggy is lying on his bed, smoking and reading yesterday’s copy of *The Sun*.

Jensen ignores him and fishes a fag out of the silver family crest emblazoned cigarette case lying on Eggy's dresser.

"On the scrounge again Ackles, you cheap tart?" Eggy says, tilting his head back up at Jensen. He blinks, says, “Jesus! What the fuck are you wearing?”

"Tell him to get changed." Percy calls plaintively from the bathroom. "He might listen to you."

"Not bloody likely!" Eggy throws the paper aside, "So what's all this in aid of then?" He gestures at
Jensen with his cigarette as he takes in Jensen's apparel: black drainpipe jeans, combat boots, distressed grey t-shirt and his leather biker jacket. "Trying to impress someone?"

"Just felt like it," Jensen answers with a shrug.

"Bollocks!"

He smirks at Eggy. "Got a light?"

Eggy gives him a long look before he gives in, holding out his cigarette. Jensen takes it, puts the end to his own cigarette and inhales deeply.

“Cheers,” he hands the cigarette back to Eggy.

“So, Ackles, you after one of the girls then?” says Percy coming into the room.

Eggy gives him a withering look. “Did we say you could come into our room, Percy? Did we give you permission to enter this room?”

Percy gulps and backs away immediately. Jensen gives Eggy a pointed look. “Thought you’d made a resolution not to be such a tosser.”

Eggy waves his hand. “You’d be wrong. Anyway, we were talking about you.”

“No, we weren’t.”

“Oh yes we were, my tartish friend. This--” he waves his cigarette at Jensen again --"this is all about impressing him isn’t it? That weirdo tall freak.”

“What the fuck you on about?” Jensen says.

"For fuck’s sake, Ackles! I’m not a complete moron! It's not just the way he looks at you. It's you too. Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"You're talking shite, mate."

"Yeah, right. All those extra study sessions and practice with McKenzie. You never used to need that much bloody practice! And the drawings? Why the hell are you letting him draw you? He’s a fucking ponce. You hang around with him, you’re going to catch it too.”

Jensen laughs, shaky and incredulous. “I don’t think it works like that.”

“Yeah, well, makes me sick when I think about it. Fucking unnatural.” Eggy grinds out the remains of his cigarette viciously in the overflowing ashtray.

Jensen watches him. His stomach is squirming uncomfortably, he takes another drag on his cigarette, tries to stop his hands shaking. He twists his mouth up into a false smirk.

“You know, you don’t have to be so bloody jealous.”

“What?”

“That’s what all this is about. I know the truth, Eggster. But don’t fret, darling, you’re still my number one best mate, you know you are.” He reaches out to tousle Eggy’s hair.

Eggy bats his hand away, scowling. “Get off, you bloody poof!”
He sits on his bed, McKenzie's stolen whiskey cradled against his chest, smoking cigarette in his hands. The others are already gone, already singing and dancing with the easy tarts from Queen Charlotte’s.

He checks his watch again. If he is going to show up then he may as well leave now. It would be stupid to get all dressed up with nowhere to go. He takes one last long, very long swig on the bottle before rolling it under his bed. He smooths down his t-shirt, smirks at his reflection and sets off.

The main entrance to the school hall is deserted, likewise the side entrance. Chairs are stacked up along the corridor and the muffled sound of music is seeping through the cracks in the side doors.

_Gimme likkle bass, make me wine up me waist; Love is all I bring inna me khaki suit and ting..._

He pushes the doors open.

_Nah pop no style, a strictly roots; Nah pop no style, a strictly roots..._

There are a few couples on the dance floor, doing awkward, jerky-kneed movements to the music. The expressions on the girls' faces are intense as they try to move and sway to the music, some of them shooting bemused looks at Toska in the corner, grinning manically over his turntables. Jensen smiles to himself, remembering Toska's championing of _Uptown Top Ranking_, as per his hero, John Peel's recommendation and Eggy's dismissive opinion: "It's not even fucking English, you wanker." Most people are hanging around on the sidelines in single gender groups, sipping the punch and looking uncomfortable.

He can’t see Jared or Eggy anywhere, but he swallows a laugh when he spots Lay On Macduff on the dance floor flailing around in an ill-advised Bob Marley-esque sway and grind. Wonder of wonders, he’s got a girl with him, though she’s standing well back, keeping out of the way of his flailing arms.

“You took your fucking time,” Eggy says, sidling up behind him.

“Takes a long time to look this good. Besides, all the cool people arrive late,” he says.

“Is that right? So why’re you hiding back here? Surely, the cool people would be out there,” he waves his hand at the dance floor, "dancing to this bollocks."

“Hardly!” Jensen snorts.

The song ends and Toska does a musical 360 degree turn into the hideously familiar opening bars of _Summer Nights_. Predictably, all the girls on the sidelines shriek in glee and rush onto the dance floor.

Eggy groans and pulls a face. “Fuck’s sake, when you think it can't get worse, he puts this shit on.”

“Jesus, I need a drink,” Jensen says.

“Aha, now there I can help, my son.” Eggy raises his eyebrows, shuffles closer to Jensen, putting
their heads together. He smirks and holds out one side of his velvet smoking jacket to show the bulging inner pocket.

“Nice one,” Jensen mutters as Eggy slides out the silver monogrammed hip flask and holds it out. He turns his back on the dance floor, shoulder to shoulder with Eggy, and takes a grateful swig. It’s nicer than the shit he pinches off McKenzie, which is to be expected. Eggy steals it from his dad, and Sir Gerald only gets the best.

“Oh, Jensen.”

He freezes with the flask to his lips, fumbles it over to Eggy, before spinning around.

It’s Caroline Stone, smiling coyly at him from under long lashes. She holds out her plastic beaker of punch, says, “You want to give me a top up?”

Jensen exchanges a look with Eggy. Eggy shrugs and holds out his flask, pouring a dollop into her punch.

She smiles, says, “Cheers,” lifting up her plastic cup in a mock toast before taking a delicate sip.

“You’re welcome,” Eggy says.

“So, Jensen, do you want to dance?” She flicks her hair out of her eyes and smiles at him. It’s a gesture that reminds him disconcertingly of Jared, and for a moment he’s caught out, unsure how to answer.

“Um, no, not to this, I think,” he says at last.

“You don’t like Grease?” she asks.

“Not really,” he says. He wishes he had a fag. Also, where is Jared? He doesn’t want to waste time flirting with girls, even though she’s definitely easy on the eye.

“Oh thank God,” she sighs, “I hate that film, but I feel like a pariah if I admit it out loud.”

“Oh really,” says Jensen. “That’s, um, interesting.”

Beside him, he hears Eggy snigger, and he shoots his friend a death glare.

“So, if you don’t want to dance, do you want to go outside for a walk?” She moves closer to him, putting her hand on the lapel of his jacket. Her hands look weirdly small, and he realises it’s because he’s comparing them to Jared’s hands. Everyone’s hands look small in comparison to Jared’s.

He can smell her perfume, see the sheen of sweat in the pale hollow of her neck and on her top lip. Jared gets sweaty in the same places and he likes to lick it off and taste Jared’s sweat. He wonders if she tastes the same. He wonders if he should touch her, put his hand on her arm or something like that. Last time, he’d done that when he’d led her out of the hall and taken her around the back of the gym. It’d been a lot warmer back then than it is now. He watches her lick her lips; her lipstick has almost come off and her mascara’s running a bit at the edges. It should look bad, but it doesn’t. It suits her. If he were able to think about anything apart from Jared for more than three seconds at a time, he’d definitely take her up on the suggestion.

In the background the song finally finishes and the drums and funky guitar of Superstition start up.

“I like your outfit, it’s really cool,” she says. “Makes you look a bit like David Soul.”
He hears Eggy stifle a snort of laughter and he bites back his own awkward laugh. Honestly, he looks nothing like David Soul, particularly dressed like this, but he understands the compliment there. He watches her blink, her eyelashes batting up and down; they’re very long and thick, probably false. She obviously wants him and she’s not being very subtle about it. She’d probably give him another blowjob if they go outside. Three months ago he would’ve jumped at the chance. Now, though, he can only think about Jared on his knees in front of him, Jared looking up at him from under spiky, much shorter lashes.

“Thanks,” he says weakly. “You look nice, too.”

Beside him, he hears Eggy muffle another laugh and he resists the urge to glare at him again.

“Thanks,” she says, tilting her head to one side and smiling at him.

He glances back at the dance floor, there are more couples there now, people actually mingling. Cockford is prowling one side of the dance floor with his arms folded, looking suspicious and beady eyed, Tulliver’s on the other side, looking benevolent. The music seems to be getting louder, Toska’s fingers getting itchy on the volume dial, no doubt. When you believe in things that you don’t understand, then you suffer, superstition ain’t the way...

Like me and Jared, he thinks.

The thought must be magic, because he suddenly spots Jared, standing on the opposite corner of the room, towering over his ginger friend. The ginger friend says something and Jensen watches Jared bend over to hear him. He’s too tall, Jensen thinks, then he wants to smile because he likes that Jared is tall, he likes his long legs and long arms and big hands and awkward elbows and knees.

Jared turns his head, looks across the room, almost as if he can feel Jensen’s eyes on him. Their gazes lock and something pops deep in Jensen’s gut, a coil of heat that seems to thrum in time with Stevie Wonder’s baseline.

“Ackles!”

He jumps. Pickford is striding towards them, his face twisted in disgust.

“Ackles! What the hell are you wearing?” he roars. He glances at Caroline. “I’m sorry, Miss Stone,” (because of course fucking Pickford knows her name), “but is this reprobate bothering you?” He turns back to Jensen. “Not that I’d expect someone of your background to understand what a dress-code is.” He grabs hold of Jensen’s arm, yanks him around.

Eggy steps hastily away, pulling Caroline with him, as Pickford drags Jensen out of the hall. Jensen doesn’t bother resisting.

“Detention, I think,” Pickford says once they’re outside, the doors thudding closed behind them, muffling the music. He looks gleeful about it, fucking prick. “A week, perhaps two.”

“You might have to check with Mr McKenzie,” Jensen says. “He won’t like me missing practice.” He shoves his hands into his pockets, leans back against the wall and eyes Pickford with the best contemptuous look he can manage. It’s petty of him, but he’s ridiculously pleased that he’s taller than the dickhead.

“That’s what you think,” Pickford says. He kicks at Jensen’s legs. “Stand up straight when I’m talking to you, boy. You’re a degenerate, Ackles, a common, little oik. Someone like you should never have been allowed into this school. You make me sick, lounging about like you own the place. Stand up, boy!” Jensen scowls at him, but he grudgingly stands up straight and takes his hands out of
his pockets. “I’m going to speak to Mr McKenzie, I’m sure we can come to some arrangement. Maybe he has some extra jobs for you, scraping mud off boots or mopping out the showers. I’m sure we can find you some employment worthy of your status in this school.”

*Cock. You’re a big fat ugly cock, Pickford.*

“In the meantime,” Pickford says, then he pauses, cocks his head to one side, face scrunching up.

The music has changed, it’s muffled, but Jensen can still recognise the familiar drums and synthesiser of Donna Summer’s *Love to Love You Baby*. He resists the urge to smirk. Good old Toska.

“I told him! I bloody told him!” Pickford spits. He whirls on Jensen, points a finger at him. “Go back to your dormitory. I’ll deal with you later.”

He spins around again – ever the drama queen – and barges back through the double doors. A blast of Donna Summer’s breathy, orgasmic voice hits Jensen, *Ooohhhhh, love to love you baby; Ooohhhhh, love to love you baby…* But he doesn’t wait to hear anymore, just turns around and walks out of there.

“Jensen!”

He stops half way across the quad. The lights of The Farm are glinting at him, beckoning him onwards. He turns around; Jared is jogging towards him.

“Did you just get kicked out of the dance?” Jared says and his breath puffs out white into the cold air. He’s grinning at Jensen, like it’s the funniest thing he’s heard in ages.

“What do you think?” Jensen says. He pushes his hands into his pockets, strikes a pose. “Apparently, I’m not dressed right.”

“I think you look all right,” Jared says.

“Do you now?” Jensen smirks, struts towards him. He puts his hand on Jared’s arm, takes another step towards him so their chests are almost brushing. He slides his hand up and around the back of Jared’s neck, fingers tangling in his hair.

Jared’s wearing the same outfit he wore to dinner with his parents a couple of weeks ago, the brown trousers and blue blazer. It’s a mark of how much he likes Jared that he actually finds the stupid, unfashionable clothes endearing now.

Jared bows his head. His throat ripples up and down. “Jensen – what are doing?”

“Come on,” Jensen murmurs, “this way.” He drops his hand, twines their fingers together and tugs Jared after him, in the direction of The Farm.

Eggy will be busy with Caroline Stone. Maybe they’ll even get off with each other. That would be convenient for all parties concerned. Toska’s still doing his impression of a deejay, though Cockford may have kicked him off the turntables now, and Percy is – well, Percy will just be Percy, acting too desperate and getting knockbacks from every girl he tries to pull. The coast is clear.

He unlocks his and Eggy’s dorm room and pulls Jared inside, whirling him around and pushing him down onto the bed. He climbs after him, knees on the mattress as Jared scuffles backwards, legs spreading to invite Jensen in. When their hips slide together, Jensen can feel that Jared is hard already, but that’s all good because so is he.
Jared noses at the side of his face, and Jensen feels it when Jared smiles against his cheek. He slides his hand between the wall and the back of Jared’s head, brushing his fingertips against the nape of Jared’s neck. Jared shivers, rolls his hips up towards Jensen, his lips part in a way that’s needy and desperate and incredibly sexy.

They undress, pulling and tugging and fighting with each other’s clothes. Jared’s elbows catch in his awful blue blazer and Jensen wrenches at it, the two of them freezing with comically wide eyes when they hear the tell-tale *wrrrripp* of fabric ripping.

“That’s your fault,” Jared hisses, but he’s grinning too, tongue caught between his teeth.

“Good. Bloody hate that thing,” Jensen says and he pulls again, watching with deep satisfaction as the fabric renders and tears.

Jared laughs giddily. He looks stoned, pupils blazed and face flushed, hair curling at the ends with sweat. Jensen cups his cheek and kisses him. He wants to swallow up that look on Jared’s face: the exhilaration and desire there. He wonders if he looks just the same.

Trousers and jeans and shirts and underpants are next and then they’re naked and Jared’s finger are digging into Jensen’s sides, dancing between his ribs and skimming over the curve of his bum. Jared’s big hands cup his bare arse cheeks and pull him in, grinding their fat cocks together until Jensen feels like he’s burning up from the inside, like his insides are throbbing, all heat and sweat and desire. Their bodies slide and slip together with sweat and it feels like they’re in a bubble, their own sweaty, sexy bubble.

Jensen pants and raises his head, gazes down at Jared, the mess of his hair spilled over his pillow, the brilliant slant of his eyes. He pushes his hand into Jared’s hair, tangles his fingers wrist-deep. Jared exhales and bares his neck, and Jensen leans in and licks over the tendons in his throat.

Jared writhes beneath him and one long leg curls around Jensen’s hips, bare heel drumming against Jensen’s thighs. Jensen kisses up Jared’s throat, his chin, puffs out a breath over his lips, feels Jared tremble beneath him. They’re both naked together, for the first time since that first time in the showers, and it’s better than he thought it would be, and Jared is – shit – he’s just gorgeous like this, and Jensen can’t get enough of it.

“Jensen,” Jared murmurs.

“That’s me,” he says.

Jared smiles. “Yeah.” He cranes his head up from the pillow to kiss him and Jensen falls into it, cradling Jared’s cheek and plunging his tongue into Jared’s mouth.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Jensen whirls around, tumbles off the bed. He whips his head up, stares in horrified disbelief as Pickford and McKenzie stand in the doorway. He didn’t lock the door; he was so bloody eager to do this that he didn’t lock the door. And he forgot. *I’ll deal with you later*, Pickford had said and Jensen forgot. He’s a moron.

He covers his cock - *Oh God, his erect cock* - with his hands, gulps and bows his head, his body flushing all over.

“Well, I knew you were filthy common ponce, Ackles, but it’s so nice to have proof,” sneers Pickford.
The arsehole looks so gleeful, even more pleased than he did when he was chucking Jensen out of the dance only fifteen minutes before.

_Why does he hate me so much?_ Jensen thinks pathetically. _What have I ever done to him?

“Don’t you think so, Mr McKenzie? Do you see what your pet gets up to in his spare time?” Pickford spits the words out like he’s relishing them, and he is, the sick, twisted prick. “Did you see what they were doing together? These disgusting perversions. Makes me sick.”

Jensen hasn’t dared look at McKenzie’s face, but he can feel the man’s eyes on him, running all over his naked body, seeing him, drinking him in. All those lingering touches over the years, the knowledge secret and insidious in his head of what the special training sessions and late night talks, and “I’m trusting you with this, Ackles,” when he’d handed the key to that bloody equipment cupboard over, McKenzie’s hand closing over his own and staying there, big sweaty fingers swallowing up Jensen’s, the roll of McKenzie’s throat when his eyes met Jensen’s. “I don’t give this to just anyone, Ackles, but you’re special, you’re a real prospect.” McKenzie’s other hand sliding up Jensen’s arm and lingering, always lingering. He’d felt sick afterwards, cold and sweaty and he’d wanted to throw the fucking key away, but it had come in useful in its own way.

Jensen’s always known what McKenzie really wanted from him but he’s always been grateful that the bastard was too fucking scared to take it. _He’s the real pervert_, Jensen thinks viciously, but he can’t say it, and he can’t - fuck - McKenzie might be his only chance of not getting kicked out of this fucking shithole of a school for good.

“Get dressed, both of you. We’re going to pay a visit to the headmaster.”

He waits outside the headmaster’s office while Jared goes in first. Tulliver arrives shortly afterwards, looks down at him and shakes his head.

“Oh dear, Ackles, what have you been doing?”

He doesn’t say anything, just smiles weakly at the housemaster and awaits his fate. Jared comes out after only ten minutes; his eyes look red like he’s been crying. He glances at Jensen, his bottom lip trembles like he’s about to cry again. Jensen fists his fingers around the edges of his plastic chair.

“I’m sorry,” Jared says.

Jensen blinks, his throat feels tight and his eyes sting but he is not going to cry. He’s not going to give them that satisfaction.

“Not your fault,” he says, though he’s not sure if he means it, because this is Jared’s fault. If Jared hadn’t come up to him that day after P.E. then they wouldn’t be here now. He never had these dirty feelings about any other boys. It was Jared who made him feel like this.

Jared looks like he’s about to say something else but the headmaster’s door thrusts open and Tulliver reappears.
“Ackles, come in here,” he says.

He gets up and goes into the office. He doesn’t watch Jared leave.

“We telephoned your parents,” says Dean Fallon.

Jensen’s heart sinks, but he doesn’t let his expression show it, just keeps looking straight ahead at the headmaster. He can count the number of times Dean Fallon’s spoken to him on one hand. The man is so far removed from them he could actually be the god he thinks he is.

“They’ll be here shortly.”

“Am I going to be expelled?” he says.

Dean Fallon steeps his fingers under his chin and regards Jensen with what can only be described as his old wise man look.

“You and Padalecki are not the first, and you won’t be the last. These kinds of proclivities,” he pauses delicately, “it seems that there is an element in every year. But Sanditon can no longer turn a blind-eye to such behaviour.”

Jensen doesn’t say anything. The office feels claustrophobic and overheated. The gas fire hisses in the corner, on its highest setting. There’s a boring watercolour on the wall behind Fallon’s head, it’s of a harbour, dull nondescript fishing boats and fake blue sky.

“You’re suspended for next week whilst we decide what to do about you,” finishes up Fallon. “Mr Tulliver tells me you have a conditional offer from the LSE.”

“Yes, sir,” Jensen says.

“And you’re predicted all A’s. Both you and Padalecki, two of our most promising students.” He shakes his head again. “I am obliged to notify the scholarship committee of course. They will wish to have a say in the matter.”

Of course they will. He’s just the scholarship boy. There’s probably some sort of ridiculous moral clause in his scholarship agreement: *thou shalt not fuck the arses or suck the cocks of thy fellow students.* Unless they’re a frightened and exploitable first year of course, then that’s perfectly acceptable. Only six years ago and it had all been normal, just part of the way this school was run, making eleven year olds the sex toys of the older boys. Except now it’s wrong and he’s the unnatural one. What a bunch of fucking hypocrites. Well fuck them; he doesn’t need this fucking school. He can take the exams anywhere. He could even go back to his old school. He’d probably be killed on his first day back but it would still be better than this.

“Oh, love, please tell me it’s not true,” his mum says tearfully when he slides into the passenger seat of the Marina.

“Where’s Dad?” he says instead. It’s dark and cold inside the car; the heater is obviously not
working again. Fucking British cars. Buy British, his dad always insists, except British cars are fucking shit and British Leyland is on its knees. “Why didn’t he come?” he says again, watching his breath cloud in front of him, just like Jared’s did earlier. It feels like a lifetime ago, though it can only be a couple of hours.

She turns away from him, curling her gloved hands around the steering wheel. “He’s very upset,” she says.

“Oh.” He looks away from her, through the passenger side window. He tries to imagine what Tulliver said on the phone. Your son’s been caught in an indecent and unnatural situation with another boy. They were both in a state of arousal and we have reason to believe that they may have acted upon certain perverted urges. He bites his lip on the hysterical laugh bubbling in his belly.

He spots the Padalecki Bentley on the other side of the car park. Jared’s parents are here too. He wonders if Jared will ever come back. He’s a paying pupil so he won’t have to prove his moral fibre to a fucking committee like Jensen does, but they could still refuse to have him back.

He decides it’s probably better not to worry about it; he’s got enough on his plate already. His mum starts the engine without another word and they pull out of the car park. Jensen keeps staring out of the window.

It’s after midnight by the time they make it back home, but his dad is still out.
His dad isn’t speaking to him. He ignores him if they pass each other in the kitchen or in the back corridor that leads to the shop. Jensen stays up in his room or rides his bike aimlessly. He eats dinner in silence, listening to his father ranting about the lorry drivers’ strike, about all the deliveries that haven’t come through to the shop.

He finishes up all his assignments, including the essay from Pickford and doesn’t think about whether he’ll ever get the chance to hand it in. He practices the subjunctive tense and learns his vocabulary lists for French. He reads *Le Petit Prince* again and swallows over the lump in his throat when he gets to the parts about the prince and the fox.

At night, he dreams about Jared and wakes up hard and aching. He brings himself off with thoughts of Jared and images of Jared and fantasies of Jared running through his head.

After three days, he decides to phone him.

He has to find Jared’s number first. The Bexley, Greenwich and Woolwich telephone directory is about as useful as a chocolate teapot because Jared doesn’t live round here, Jared lives in nice, smart, stockbroker belt Surrey. Jensen stands at the bus stop for thirty minutes before an old woman with a shopping trolley tells him that they’re all on strike again. He sighs and trudges back home to fetch his bike. He cycles to the centre of Bexley, heading for the library. There’s a picket line out the front and the library’s closed. He stares at it disbelievingly, and thinks that a whole world of things have been going on in the outside world while he’s been cooped up inside fucking Sanditon.

One of the picketers tells him that “those fucking scabs in Eltham” have opened the library there, so he thanks him, refuses to donate his last ten pence to the cause, and gets on his bike again.

The library is open, just a handful of half-hearted strikers outside, sitting muffled up in deckchairs and pouring tea from thermoses, Tupperware containers of sandwiches on their laps. They eye him
belligerently as he chains up his bike outside the building. Jensen ignores them, and heads inside.

There are shelves and shelves of phone directories and Yellow Pages in the reference section. He grabs the three that cover the Surrey area. He starts to page through them, thanking God that Jared’s surname isn’t Smith or Jones.

There are only two Padaleckis in the Kingston upon Thames and North West Surrey directory. The first is a Mrs, but the second... *Mr D Padalecki*, he reads, *The Pines, Godalming Drive, Esher.*

Bingo.

His palms feel clammy as he dials the number in the phone box opposite the library. It rings four times then a woman picks up.

“Hello?”

“Hello, um, is Jared there? Can I speak to him?”

The woman hesitates before she asks, “Who is this?”

“I’m a friend from school,” he says. He adjusts the grip on the plastic receiver, his heart is beating fast, his armpits feel sweaty. There are cards in the windows of the phone box, all of them for prostitutes and lap dancing clubs. He didn’t realise Eltham had so many prostitutes.

There’s a longer pause and then the woman says, “You’re him, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” he stutters out, which is entirely the wrong thing to say because he hears her suck in a breath like a hiss.

When she speaks again, her voice is harder, sharper: “You’re that boy. The one that seduced my son.”

Seduced? She’s making it sound like he’s a rake in an eighteenth century novel. It’s ridiculous. Besides, she’s wrong, it wasn’t him who seduced Jared, it was Jared who seduced him.

“No, I don’t know what you mean,” he says again, “I just want to see if he’s alright. We’re in the same class for English Lit, we were working on a project together--”

“Stay away from my son,” she hisses and then the line clicks off and he’s left with the dial tone buzzing in his ear.

“Shit!” he curses. He replaces the receiver, hears the chink of his ten pence falling into the box.

He can hear his parents arguing when he slips into the back kitchen. He hesitates by the door to the lounge and listens.

“This isn’t a discussion, Mary! We’re not letting him go back there and that is final!”
They’re arguing about him. Of course they are. Barely a crossed word for years and then all this happens and they’re at each other’s throats. Another thing he should feel guilty about.

“But, Jim, what about university? If he doesn’t pass his exams then they won’t let him in, you know that!”

“He can take his exams at the local Comp. If it was good enough for me then it’s good enough for him. You’ve always spoiled him too bloody much, letting him go off to that poncey place. It’s not for the likes of us I said, but you wouldn’t bloody listen to me!”

Jensen doesn’t wait to hear anymore.

He takes his bike out of the shed and heads north, taking a shortcut through Plumstead Cemetery and Bostoll Woods. He keeps going north until he’s surrounded by the new concrete high rises of Thamesmead. He doesn’t stop until he gets to the river. He pulls up along one of the river paths and climbs off his bike. He props it up against the metal railings, lights up a cigarette and stares out across the River Thames.

The river is dark and murky, at one with the grey, unrelenting drizzle. On the opposite north shore, the lights of the power station and sewage works of Beckton and Barking blink blearily back at him. He’s never been to Esher in Surrey where Jared lives in a house nice enough to not be known as a number, but he doesn’t think it looks anything like this.

He checks his watch. It’s half past four, the sky is already darkening. He thinks about what he’d be doing if he were at Sanditon now. He’d be in the Study Room, trying to study, or in the Common Room, messing around with Eggy or Toska or Lay On or even Percy, waiting for the bell to summon them to Supper. Eggy hasn’t rung him at all. He doesn’t know why he expected anything different. Eggy will know all about it by now, he’s probably trying to make out that he and Jensen were never friends. He doesn’t want to get mixed up with the dirty shirtlifter after all. It might be catching.

He chuck his fag end over the railings and into the river. He watches it disappear into the murky grey depths. He picks up his bike, turns it around and heads back towards home.

His mum is in the kitchen when he arrives back, slicing potatoes. The chip pan’s on the hob and the kitchen smells of grease. There are three unwrapped pork chops sitting on the worktop by the cooker, looking pale and unappetising.

“Oh, there you are,” his mum says, looking up from her chopping. “Do you want a cup of tea?”

"Um, yeah, thanks," he says.

She nods towards the kettle where it's plugged into the wall. "Well you know how to make it."

He rolls his eyes at her, but he's hiding a smile. This is normal, all entirely normal. Normal is good.

"Pork chops tonight," she says after he's filled the kettle and turned on the switch. "Mr Jones finally had a new delivery. They look good, don’t they?"

The pork chops actually look anything but good, but he nods in agreement anyway. “Um, yeah, of course.” She’s never asked for his opinion on dinner before.

She sighs and pauses in her chopping, turns around to look at him. “Jensen, the school rang earlier.”

“Oh,” he says. He swallows. “What did they say?”
“They want me and your father to come in for a meeting. But your father,” she breaks off, rests the knife down on the chopping board. He stares at her hands, her fingers look bright red and wrinkled, like she’s been running them under cold water for a long time, which is probably what she has been doing, scrubbing the potatoes. They get the last pick of the fruit and veg that passes through the shop. It’s always bruised or mouldy and the potatoes are always 50 percent dirt. It’s been even worse these past few weeks, since the strikes started and the daily deliveries stopped.

She sighs and curls her fingers around the edge of the warped worktop. “Your dad doesn’t want you to go back there. He thinks it’s had a bad influence on you.”

Jensen bows his head, resists the absurd urge to laugh. His dad is probably right. Sanditon can go to hell as far as he’s concerned, but on the other hand, it’s his way out - off here, of the shop and this street and fucking Welling, South East London. It was why he took the entrance exam in the first place.

“But I don’t agree with him,” she adds firmly. “You’re my boy and I’m going to make sure you go to university. You’ve worked hard for it. I don’t care what lies they say and what they think they know, I know you and you’re a good boy. You deserve this chance.”

He swallows over the lump in his throat, nods, feels the hot blur of tears in his eyes. He smiles weakly at her. “Thanks.”

“Come here,” she says, and her voice cracks a little. He takes a step towards her, lets her pull him in and wind her arms around him like she does at the beginning of every term when they drop him off. She’s a lot shorter than him now, her head only reaches his chest, but it doesn’t stop her from reaching up to ruffle his hair. She pulls back when she’s done and pats his cheek, smiling softly at him. “Such a handsome face,” she says.

He feels his cheeks flush and he rolls his eyes at her. She snorts and pulls her hand back, letting it rest on his damp sleeve. “Go get changed into some dry clothes. I’ll finish up the tea.”

He nods, “Alright, yes,” and heads for the stairs.

The next morning his dad wakes him at 5am. It’s dark outside and his head is pounding. He slept badly, worrying about everything and dreaming about Jared again.

“Get up!” his dad snaps. “I need you in the shop today.”

He groans, but he doesn’t dare say no. Not when his dad can barely look him in the eye. It’s a marker of how badly he’s fucked up that his dad has left it this long to demand his presence in the shop. Usually, he’s on him on his first day back.

About ten o’clock, his mum comes into the shop wearing her best coat, carrying her leather gloves and the handbag she wears to weddings.

“Jim, I’m going now,” she says.
His dad looks up from where he’s taking stock of the tinned fruit. He looks her over, his lip perks up into a sneer. “You look smart.”

“Want to make a good impression,” she says.

He doesn’t say anything and Jensen holds his breath, glances between the two of them. The moment stretches and holds and then his dad turns his head and looks at him. “Can you handle the shop for the next few hours?”

Jensen gulps and nods. “Yeah, yeah, course.”

His dad nods slowly, turns his head again. He straightens, moves to the counter where Jensen is sitting at the stool by the till. He puts the clipboard on the counter, says to his mum, “Give me five minutes. Get the car warmed up.”

She smiles and nods. “I will.”

They both hold their breath as his dad disappears into the back, then she moves towards Jensen, puts her hand on his shoulder. “It’ll be okay, love. I’m going to work things out for you.”

It’s the rugby that saves him.

“They know their season’s over without you,” his dad says as they celebrate over fish and chips and cans of Carling Black Label. “And those bloody old boys don’t want that. Clamouring to have you back, they were.”

His mum shakes her head. “Don’t listen to him, it wasn’t like that.”

His dad snorts contemptuously, and squeezes a large dollop of tomato sauce on his chips.

“Your teacher, Mr McKenzie, he spoke for you. He said he couldn’t win the cup without you,” his mum says, unable to disguise the hint of pride in her voice.

“He can’t. The boy’s got a 92% conversion rate,” his dad interrupts. “I always thought that bloke was a bit dodgy, that P.E. bloke, but your mum’s right, he spoke up for you. He told them all you were a good boy, hardworking and talented, he said. Rain or shine, or freezing cold snow on the ground, you’re out there training. There’s not many like that, he said, Jensen's special. Those were his exact words.”

He can see from the look on his dad's face that he doesn't believe it now - not the stuff about him and Jared. In his dad’s view, a man can’t play rugby, train in all weathers, go out in short sleeves in the snow and hail, and be a poofter. The two things are entirely incompatible to his dad's view of life. It's ironic that it's McKenzie of all people that's made him believe that.

Still, Jensen supposes he should be grateful to McKenzie. It was his tearful character reference that swayed them in the end. He thinks about all the alcohol he’s stolen from McKenzie’s secret stash, he has to know that Jensen’s the one responsible and yet he hasn’t mentioned a word of it. He supposes
he should be grateful for that too. But then he thinks about the way McKenzie looked at him when they caught him and Jared together, the obvious hunger and exhilaration in his eyes, and Jensen knows that this is not the end of it. He’ll be paying for McKenzie’s support of him.

“It’s only for a few more months,” his mum says, looking at him sympathetically across the table. He nods, attempts to smile back at her. Only a few more months. He can do that.

His dad drives him back on Sunday, dropping him off out of site of the school gates. His dormitory is deserted. Instead of Eggy's enormous Kate Bush poster, a detailed map of Middle Earth is fastened above the wall of the other bed. Instead of the Fitzgerald family bed linen, there's the standard issue Sanditon sheets. The cardboard box of records under the desk is gone; the seven LP’s and five singles that belong to Jensen are tossed carelessly on his bed.

It all adds up to one thing: Eggy's ditched him and Percy has drawn the short straw.

The bastard owes him three quid.

He drops onto his own bed and tries to read Othello, their next English Lit text, but he can't concentrate. Instead he listens to both sides of Station to Station on Percy's headphones, his face burrowed under his pillow. When the album is finished, he drops the stylus back on the last track and listens to Wild is the Wind again, and then again, and again. He wishes he'd had a chance to make Jared listen to that song. He's quite sure that Jared would've loved it too.

He doesn't see any of them until supper. The rest of the Upper Sixth watches him with a mixture of curiosity and revulsion, Eggy ostentatiously ignoring him. The grapevine has been working at full strength during his absence. Jared’s spot at the Lower Sixth table is ominously empty and Jared’s ginger friend keeps turning around and staring at Jensen throughout the meal.

"How are you, Ackles?" Percy asks, sounding his usual trying-too-hard self. He obviously hasn’t got the memo about Jensen being sent to Coventry. Then again, they're sharing a room now. Ignoring each other would be really awkward.

"Fine." He spears a potato with his fork, watches the thick brown gravy drip onto his plate.

"So is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"What Eggy said about you being bent?"

Jensen turns his head, blinks at him. “What?”

“You and that Padalecki kid being all bent together. Eggy said that Pickford caught you, you know- -" he widens his eyes, leans in, whispers, “–having it off?”

“Eggy’s a cunt,” he says. It feels good to say it out loud, though Percy looks horrified, eyes widening
in shock. Jensen licks his lips, adds, “Don’t listen to anything he says.”

"But everybody says that--"

"For fuck’s sake, Percy!" He drops his fork to his plate with a clatter. Percy looks at him with reproachful eyes. He sighs. "Sorry. So, are you going to move to another room as well?"

"No. There’s no one else who’d like to share with me."

Jensen represses the urge to roll his eyes and tries to ignore the sound of laughter from Eggy's end of the table.

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His first practice with the rest of the team goes much better than he'd expected.

Shithouse greets him first, rising ponderously from the bench in the changing room and approaching him with a steely glint in his eyes.

"I don't believe a fucking word of it," he announces. All the other boys look up from whatever they're pretending to do and stare avidly at the two of them. "It's all malicious, spiteful bollocks." He drops a firm meaty hand onto Jensen's shoulder and stares into his face. "Don't take any notice of what any of those bastards are saying out there. You're alright, Ackles, anyone who can play like you is alright." He claps him heavily on the back then glares meaningfully at the rest of the team.

Jensen's surprisingly moved by the display. He still gets tackled a lot more viciously than normal in the Seven on Sevens, but he was expecting that, and this is rugby after all. Anyone who can't put up with having their face ground into the mud and fifteen stone of front row slamming the breath out of them shouldn't be playing the bloody game.

He sticks around as normal after practice is done, gathering up the balls for his usual three-kicks-and-practice. He can feel it when McKenzie approaches him and he curls his fingers into fists, sets his shoulders and turns around to confront the man.

"Thank you for - speaking for me," he says. "I know if you hadn't said anything then I wouldn't be here. So, um, thanks."

McKenzie stares back at him, there's a look in his eyes that wasn't there before, and Jensen feels his stomach flip over, the nausea gather in his guts. McKenzie knows what he looks like naked now; he knows what he looks like when he's hard. He's seen his erect cock, he saw him and Jared together. That knowledge is always going to be there between them now, festering, and Jensen can't stop thinking about it.

"And I - I'm sorry, about the whiskey. I promise I won't take it anymore."

McKenzie shakes his head, he smiles at Jensen and Jensen feels his stomach plummet.

"Ackles, I was well aware it was you who was taking it."
"Oh," Jensen says lamely.  
"In future, just come to me if you want booze. I'd be quite happy to help you get hold of some. You're eighteen years old; you shouldn't have to resort to these ridiculous subterfuges. I'm sure we could work out something between us." He takes a step towards Jensen, puts a hand on his arm.  

Jensen resists the urge to flinch away, mutters, "Yes, thanks, Sir."

"And no more of this Sir business, it's Kelvin, alright, Jensen?"

"Yes, Kelvin."

"Good." McKenzie removes his hand slowly, fingers dragging down Jensen's bare arm, leaving a rush of goosebumps in their wake. "Now, let's see how your kicking's doing, shall we? After all, we don't want to be out here all night. I'm sure the both of us have other things we'd much rather be doing."

He confronts Eggy a week later in the Common Room. He’s sitting in their corner alongside Toska and Lay On and even fucking Cliff-Bentley, and who gave that tosspot permission to sit in their corner? He’s not part of their group.

“You owe me three quid,” he says.

Eggy pretends not to hear him.

“I’m speaking to you, Claude.”

He sees Eggy’s lips twitch, his eyes narrow at the hated name. In the background, Eggy’s copy of Rumours is playing on the record player, Go Your Own Way, it seems weirdly appropriate.

“Did someone say something?” Eggy says, looking around at their assembled, so-called friends. Jensen sees Toska smirk and hide a nervous smile behind his hand. Lay On is pretending to read the NME, and Cliff-Bentley is watching them both with obvious enjoyment.

Eggy was the first person who’d spoken to him when he’d started at this shithole school in his fourth year. Eggy had showed him around and told him all the secrets to getting on the right side of the masters and how to score extra pudding at lunchtime. They’d bonded over David Bowie and Eggy’s extensive record collection. “You’re welcome to play any of them when you like,” Eggy had said, acting the generous lord of the manor, and Jensen had over the years. He’d been a guest at the Fitzgerald family estate in Hampshire more than once. He’d even lost his virginity in Eggy’s bedroom with Eggy’s second cousin, Annabelle, four years his senior and a student at RADA, during the infamous Fitzgerald Family New Year’s Eve party of 1976. “You’re awfully good looking. We should go upstairs and shag,” Annabelle had said, pushing him up against the drawing room wall, Eggy giggling into his glass of port as he watched. Afterwards, he and Eggy had laughed about Jensen’s deflowering, and drunk another bottle of Sir Gerald’s vintage port between them as they lay on Eggy’s bed and toasted the New Year.
They were supposed to be friends.

“You’re pathetic,” he says. His throat feels tight and his chest is heavy.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand you. Maybe you should try speaking the Queen’s English, instead of whatever that accent is supposed to be,” Eggy says.

Jensen grits his teeth, curls his fingers up into a fist, and punches him.

He gets sent to the Headmaster’s office again.

“This is becoming a regular occurrence, Ackles,” Dean Fallon says, steepling his fingers under his chin.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” he says.

Dean Fallon sighs. “I know. You’re always sorry. Everybody’s always sorry. But you’re not the one who has to deal with Sir Gerald when he phones me up and complains that someone has punched his oldest son in the face.”

Jensen bites his lip, doesn’t say anything.

“Still, boys will fight. It’s a natural fact of life, and I’m sure Sir Gerald will understand.” He leans forward, crosses his arms on the table. “In the meantime, detention, I think. Mr McKenzie tells me that he has a few jobs with which he could use your help. Now that won’t be so bad, will it?”

“No, Sir. Thank you, Sir,” he says.

He feels sick to his stomach.

The ginger kid, Jared’s friend, is called Paul Dwyer.

“He’s at home,” he says in answer to Jensen’s question. “His dad’s getting him a private tutor.”

“Oh,” Jensen says. He glances around him, lifts his hand to the back of his neck awkwardly. It probably doesn’t look good for him to be talking to this kid. Everybody’s treating Dwyer as just as much of a pariah as Jensen. Actually a lot more so because at least Jensen has Percy and most of the kids from the team still talking to him, even if his former group of friends are ignoring him since he punched Eggy in the face.

“He won’t be coming back,” Dwyer adds. His eyes Jensen accusingly, as if this is all his fault.

*I didn’t start it*, he wants to protest. *And I’m back here. If I’m back here then Jared could be too, he’s got no excuse.*

Except he’s not certain about that. He’s the star of the rugby First XV, Jared is the weirdo arty kid. McKenzie spoke for him, the only master who would speak for Jared is Mr Cross, the Art Master,
and no one takes any notice of him. McKenzie has half of the alumni on his side.

“He’s still going to take his A levels,” says Dwyer. “He wasn’t expelled, that’s what everyone’s saying, but they’re wrong. They’re all blaming him.”

“They’re not being exactly nice to me either,” Jensen says bitterly.

Dwyer shrugs. “S’pose so. But it’s his dad. I don’t know if he told you about his dad, but he’s not. Well, he doesn’t like the fact that his son’s...” he tilts his head, “you know, a homo.”

Jensen cringes. It’s not like he hasn’t heard the word numerous times since he’s been back, along with arse-bandit, cocksucker, poof, bender, fairy, queer, shirt-lifter...

"He's a bastard, his father, they always hated each other."

He thinks about Jared saying, we’re going to become estranged at some point, it’s inevitable. He won’t want me around when he knows what I am, and I’m not going to lie for the rest of my life. But Jared’s brave, and Jared knows what he is. Jensen doesn’t know anything.

“Yeah, I know,” he says.

Dwyer nods seriously. He seems to be a serious sort of person: quiet, studious, with pale watery eyes and pale ginger hair and that look that Jensen had always considered sly. He feels bad for thinking that now.

“I’m going to phone him tonight,” Dwyer says. “If you want, you could speak to him. I know he’d like that. He asks about you a lot. He always talked about you. I used to take the mick, tell him he was obsessed with you.”

“Oh, right,” Jensen says. He likes the idea of Jared being obsessed with him. It makes him feel all warm inside.

“So, you want to talk to him then?”

“Yeah, yeah, I do.”

On Tuesday morning, Jensen pretends to be ill. It’s not difficult to convince Percy, who stares at him, horrified, from the other bed, when he starts coughing and spluttering and rasping at him.

He sneaks out of the building while everybody else is in senior assembly, and hitches to the town station where he catches the next train to London. He walks down Marylebone Road and then Euston Road, turns into Gower Street and pauses outside the front of the Slade School of Fine Art.

Jared’s interview is at 11 o’clock.

Jensen pushes his hands into his pockets and strolls down Gower Place and onto Gordon Street where the UCL Students Union building stands. There are students milling around outside handing
leaflets out to passers-by. Three of them converge on him and he neatly sidesteps them, elbowing them away as he walks into the building.

He buys a cup of tea in the canteen and tries to look like he belongs here. He wishes he’d brought a book; he could’ve finished *Othello* if he’d thought about it. He glances at his watch again. Quarter past. Jared should be in the middle of his interview by now. He lights up a cigarette.

It’s another thirty minutes before he spots Jared. Jared’s dressed in his duffle coat and he’s carrying a bulky portfolio under his arm. Jensen sees the moment when Jared spots him, Jared’s face breaking into an enormous grin as he weaves his way between the mostly empty tables and chairs to Jensen’s table. He drops his portfolio on the floor and thuds down onto the chair.

“Hello,” he says.

“How’d it go?” Jensen says.

“Good, I think. They’re going to write to me to say yes or no. They really liked the pictures - the ones of you.”

Jensen snorts a laugh, he’s smiling, he can’t stop it. He’s ridiculously happy to see Jared again. He didn’t realise he’d missed him this much, but it's been a month, a really long month when he hasn't stopped thinking about him. He’d worried that the real thing wouldn’t be the same as the pictures in his head, and it's not, it's so much better. He wants to lean over the table and touch Jared's arm, run his finger over the tendons in Jared's hands. He wants to put his hands in Jared's hair and kiss him.

“You have good taste then,” he says.

“Yeah, they do,” Jared says. He keeps staring at Jensen, keeps smiling, and Jensen keeps smiling back at him. They probably look deranged. People are probably staring. He glances around, but no one’s looking their way, all too involved in their own thing. He wants to laugh again.

“My dad’ll be here in an hour, he doesn’t trust the trains, though I told him they weren’t on strike today. I think it’s just an excuse because he doesn’t trust me.”

“Well, he’s right about that,” says Jensen.

Jared laughs and Jensen grins again. He can’t help it. *Infectious*, he thinks, staring at Jared’s wide mouth and the dimples slicing into his cheeks. He wants to kiss him so badly it actually hurts.

“Are you hungry?” Jensen asks. “You want to get some food?”

They get sausage, chips and gravy and mugs of tea. Jared insists on paying. “It’s my fault you’re here,” he says apologetically.

“And that makes Jared grin again.

Neither of them manages to eat much. Jensen pushes aside his half finished plate, lights up another cigarette. He takes a drag, feeling Jared's eyes on him.
"I want to take pictures of you, like that, smoking," Jared says, his voice low. He puts his elbow on the table, leans his chin on his hand, staring intently at Jensen. "I want to take lots of pictures of you, of your body, of your face, of you naked. You're so perfect, Jensen."

"Shut up," Jensen mutters, blushing. His belly is churning, his cock fattening. The smoke burns the back of his throat when he inhales too deeply.

Jared smiles at him, soft and intimate, he pushes his hand across the table, brushes his fingers against Jensen's arm. "Let's get out of here," he says.

Jensen stubs his fag out in the mess of congealed gravy and sausage. He pushes his chair back so fast the legs screech on the floor. They hurry outside the Union building.

"Where should we go?" Jared says.

There are a lot more people outside the front now, some of them holding banners. They seem to be organising some sort of a protest.

They push through the crowd, Jensen’s fingers catch in Jared’s sleeve. “Round the back?” he suggests.

Jared nods and follows after him. Even in the freezing cold, they can smell the bins before they see them. The bags and bags of rubbish piled up and piled up, completely covering the small yard outside what looks to be the kitchen door.

“Oh, I forgot about that,” Jared says with a frown.

Jensen turns his head, widens his eyes incredulously. The binmen’s strike has been his dad’s main topic of conversation in every phone conversation they’ve had since Jensen went back to school. Apparently, their garden is covered in rubbish bags and his mum is terrified of going out there because of the rats. It’s one of the reasons Jensen’s not gone home since he went back. That, and McKenzie’s special detention of course.

He swallows; he doesn’t want to think about that now. He doesn’t want anything to spoil this time with Jared.

Jared drops his bulky portfolio to the ground and turns to face him. “I don’t care,” he says. “Come here.”

Jensen stares at him then he pushes him back against the brick wall, and crowds in close, feet knocking against the rubbish bags. He frames Jared’s face with both hands, pushing his fingers into Jared's hair just like he’s been thinking about since he saw him. It feels soft and silky and he cradles the back of Jared's neck, pulling him down into a kiss. The kiss is sloppy and heated and they're both groaning with it, rolling their hips together, both of them hard and aching. Jared scrapes his teeth against Jensen's bottom lip, tugging it into his mouth. When Jensen pulls back, Jared's eyes are bright and burning with the kind of intensity that steals Jensen's breath.

“I dream about you every night,” Jared says.

"Yeah, me too."

“Really?”

“Yeah.”
"I’m so pleased you came. I thought about you so much that I didn’t think that you were real. It was stupid."

Jensen blushes, he tries to shrug. "Course I came, any chance to fuck over those bastards.”

"Jensen."

“What?"

"Just don’t get yourself expelled."

Jensen exhales, steps back, letting his hands fall to dangle by his sides. "If they didn’t expel me for buggery then they’re not going to expel me for skiving off for one bloody day."

Jared blushes. "It wasn’t - we weren’t doing that."

"But you wanted to, didn’t you?"

"Maybe." Jared ducks his head, his cheeks are flaming now. He glances up at Jensen through his eyelashes, his expression a little coy. "But we should save that. For later."

Later, Jensen thinks, will there really be a later? Can we really do this? Can we both escape here, to London? Be together like we want to be? They haven’t said it out loud yet, but they don’t need to.

"I can’t, I don’t think I can tell my parents," he blurts out.

Jared’s expression softens. He cups Jensen’s cheek. "You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. That’s up to you. But I’m not giving up."

"I know."

"It’s just five months."

"Yeah, five months." It's become a mantra in his head these past few weeks: just five months, five months... No more Sanditon, no more hypocritical masters, no more hateful, contemptuous looks or names shouted at him down the corridor, no more graffiti on his and Percy’s door.

No more McKenzie.

Instead of that... freedom. University and Jared and doing what he wants when he wants, not pretending all the fucking time. Freedom. He didn't realise how much he was hanging on for it until now, until he can feel Jared under his fingertips again and hear his voice. He wants to keep holding Jared, feeling the reality of him block out all that other stuff and scrub away the memories of Eggy’s snarling hatred and McKenzie’s wandering hands and soft, insidious voice.

He turns away, putting his back to Jared. He wipes his hand across his face, smearing the stupid, hot tears. He can hear the chants of the protestors out the front. He should get back to Marylebone as soon as he can, try and catch a train back. He can’t imagine how much more detention he’ll get if he gets caught.

“We should go. Your dad’ll be here soon,” he says.

“Come here first,” Jared says, and then he’s there, wrapping his arms around Jensen from behind. He presses a kiss just below Jensen’s ear. “Just a few minutes longer,” he says. His breath puffs against the nape of Jensen’s neck and Jensen’s whole body tingles with it.
"Five months," Jensen says. His voice sounds hoarse and faint, so he swallows, says it again, louder and stronger: "Five months and then you can feel me whenever you want. I promise."

"I can't bloody wait," Jared sighs, and Jensen turns around and kisses him again.

THE END.

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