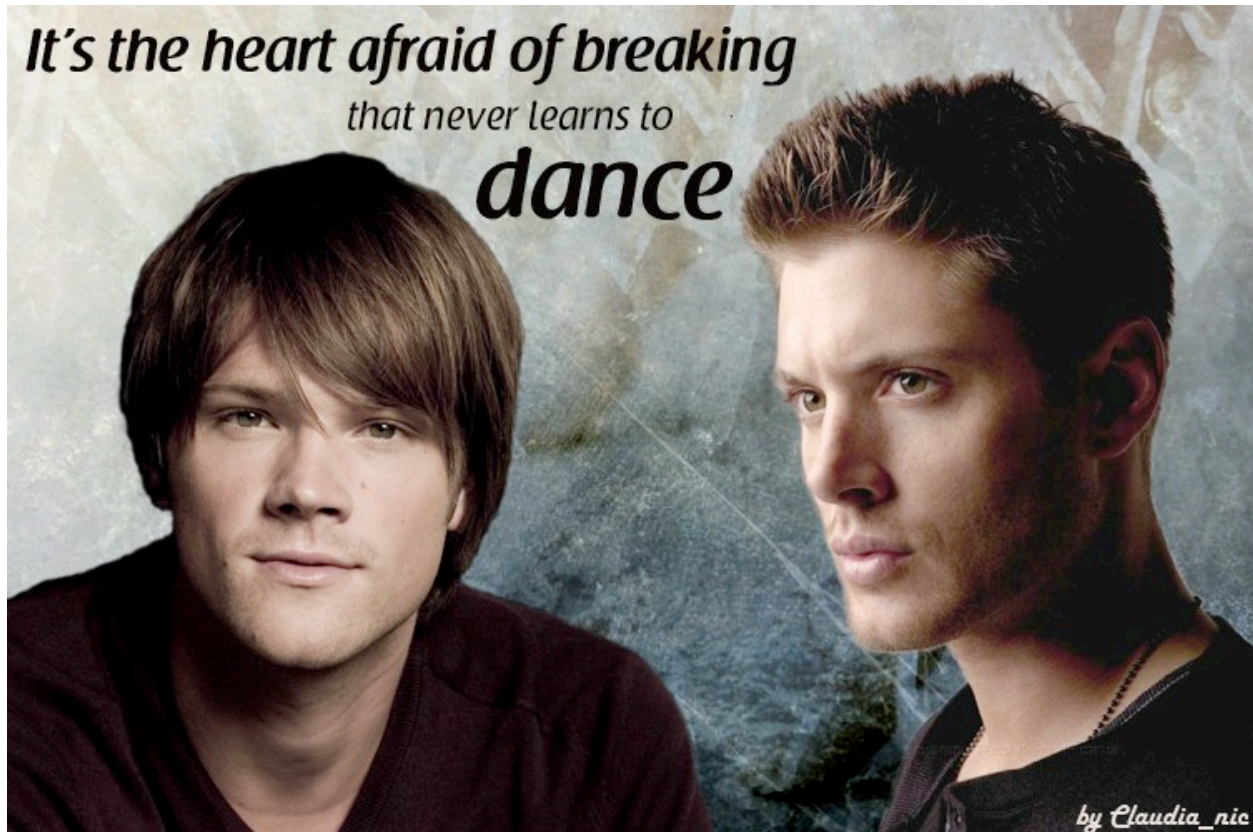


It's the Heart Afraid of Breaking that never learns to dance



Pairing: Jared/Jensen, Danneel/Chris ~ **Words:** ~41,000

Rating/Warnings: PG, mostly due to some swearing and boy/boy kissing

Disclaimer: None of this is real. And I obviously do not own Jared or Jensen

Summary: A professional career as a classical dancer is hard to come by and not easy to keep. A fact that Jensen Ackles, senior at the School for American Ballet, is fully aware of. He returns to SAB for his senior year, determined to give it his best and do what everybody expects him to do; sign with New York City Ballet. He plans on keeping his head in the game, work hard and dance even better, no place for doubts or distractions. But then Jared Padalecki dances his way into SAB and bit by bit into Jensen's heart and suddenly Jensen isn't so sure anymore about what it is he's doing. Will he manage to combine and keep both the things he loves, or will he have to give up on one to have the other?

Prologue

August 2002 – New York City

Walking into the foyer, Donna can't help but think the place hasn't changed a bit from back when she used to be a student herself. She knows they've renovated and added to the original building and more than one interior designer must have had the chance to refurbish the place, but if you strip away the fancy, gleaming front desk and the nice plush green carpet, the building still breathes the familiar mixture of hopes, dreams, hard work and dedication. It's still the same place that makes or breaks the hearts of aspiring dancers, whose dreams are filled with performing front and centre on the big stages of the world, theatres filled up to their maximum capacity, pushing themselves forward into better, sleeker, more expressive performances. Only a few would ever make it onto a stage, even less would take up the one spot they all would be fighting for. And even those who did, would continue to look out for the one thing that none of them would ever truly achieve.

Perfection.

She'd chased it herself for years. Had made it to the highest echelons of classical dance, but never, not once did she hit that perfect state. She'd come a lot closer than many others, though, so she had nothing to complain about.

She'd fought hard to keep all of this away at least for a bit longer, until it was truly inevitable. But Jeff, damned Jeffrey Dean Morgan, had dropped by unannounced for a surprise visit and after one good look at Jensen, who had been fooling around in the studio with some of her dancers, had decided he had to have him. And Jeffrey Dean Morgan got what he wanted even if it was only temporary.

She wasn't blind; she knew her kid had talent, combining her talent for dance and body type with Alan's musicality and feel for rhythm. Even now, aged 10, he was already picking up some of the more advanced steps whenever he was allowed to watch while the company trained or rehearsed. It was funny to see him try at the real big stuff, getting some of it right at first try, without any explanation or pointers but most of it was still far out of reach.

Technique was something others worked on relentlessly, but seemed to come to Jensen naturally. More importantly, he genuinely liked what he was doing, loved to dance, and loved the music and movements. So yeah, she'd been getting used to the idea, slowly but surely, that one day maybe one of her babies would follow in her footsteps.

Then Jeff had come and completely screwed up her time line. He'd wanted to take Jensen immediately, but Alan had stood by her and told him there would be no uprooting his kid in the middle of the school year, maybe not ever. It wasn't like New York was the only place he could learn the trade. There had been a lot of yelling that evening, in the company's office so the kids wouldn't hear any of it. In the end all adults involved had come to an acceptable compromise. Jensen would be invited for the School of American Ballet's Summer Course. He and only he would decide whether or not to go. If he wanted to go, they would see how things went, see how he liked it. And maybe, just maybe, afterwards Donna and Alan would discuss their son's attendance for the upcoming winter term.

They'd awaited the information brochure and invitation and after Jensen had read the entire thing for and backwards at least twice, he had come up to them and asked if maybe it would be OK for him to go.

He'd looked all excited and hopeful and nobody, not even Donna would have been able to say no to him at that moment. So they'd accepted the invitation, packed Jensen's suitcase and after much hugs and kisses and promises to call and write lots and lots, Alan had dropped him off in New York for the five-week program, which would come to its finish today with a performance for parents, friends and family. Unknown to most, it was also the day that a select few would be invited to come back and join SAB for Winter Term. Parents and children were usually taken aside at the end of the day in order to not disappoint all the other kids who didn't make the cut. Donna wasn't planning on waiting that long however.

Alan and the kids had already gone inside, searching for Jensen, who would most likely be waiting for them all in the cafeteria SAB shared with Julliard. Instead of following she makes her way through the lobby, into the girls' locker room and from there up to the parents lounge and past studio 1.

Codes never changed in this place, so she easily finds her way into the corridor that houses some of the lower level studios as well as the faculty offices. She heads for the one at the end of the hall, the one that has Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Artistic Director embossed on its door. He's not the only one who can drop in unannounced and uninvited.

January 2009 – Lausanne, Switzerland

"Ten more minutes, Mr. Padalecki. Please be prepared to go on stage."

Be prepared. Right!

He's never going to be more prepared than he is now, and it might just not be enough. Not that he has anything to complain about. A week ago, he was just Jared Padalecki, a 16-year-old kid from San Antonio that nobody ever heard of. Now he is one of twenty finalists of one of the biggest ballet competitions for young dancers in the world. People are suddenly showing interest.

So yeah, he better be prepared and not screw up. Maybe even take a prize back home to Texas. Although that would require beating the scary Russian kid who was made out of elastic and had perfect technique. And the busload of perfectly trained Japanese and Chinese dancers that had made it into the final.

He shakes out his legs one more time, stretches his arms up and cracks his back. Li-Peng is finishing up his classical solo, stumbling a bit out of his last pirouette, probably because he's still not used to the stupidly rigged stage. They all have been fumbling around on the thing, desperately trying to get a hold on how to turn their pirouettes when standing on a 20% slope. Jumps were all right, turns not so much. But this was not the time to think about what could go wrong.

Li-Ping storms off the stage, thumping him on the shoulder for luck when he walks by on his way back to the warm up room. The music to Coppelia starts up and Polina, the tiny little Polish girl that has become one of Jared's new friends this week, takes the stage. He's up next.

Five more minutes.

Just enough for one last tug at his shirt, one more look at the stupid kilt he is wearing and one last prayer to anybody or anything that was listening. If he gets this right he's one step closer to New York, one step closer to getting into SAB. They've shown interest; all he has to do is get the scholarship to pay for it all.

All he has to do is make his mark and reach for perfection!

Part One

September 2009 – New York

The first time Jared lays eyes on Jensen is on the plane to New York. It's not like he can spot a fellow dancer from a distance, far from that. But Jensen is occupying the seat that Jared is dying to have, which means that now he'll have to fold his entire 6 foot frame into one of the normal seats instead of stretching out in the one next to the emergency exit.

As far as first looks go, there's nothing special about this one. Jared's slightly annoyed when he stalks by, only catches a glimpse of big green eyes and a dash of freckles while he finds his seat five rows down the lane. Jensen's reading a copy of Rolling Stone, which Jared has to admit, goes well with the entire skinny jeans, leather jacket, and 'I just came home from a rock concert' attitude. And yes, he's only human, so if he looked a bit longer than absolutely necessary that's not his fault. He just appreciates nice things when he sees them and the guy definitely looks very nice even though he's sitting in Jared's seat. It's not like he's going to see him again.

He forgets all about Jensen the moment he sets foot on New York soil. Well, he probably shouldn't be calling JFK New York soil, but for Jared, who's born and raised in Texas, it definitely is. The airport is big and busy and he's glad his Mom insisted on making use of the SAB pick up service, because he's suddenly not that sure he would have found his way out of the place by himself.

There's a guy standing halfway though the hall with a big sign that reads SAB, surrounded by a group of kids that are patiently waiting. He walks over, introduces himself, gets ticked of a list and joins the waiting. He's introduced and shakes some hands but Jim, who turns out to be one of the Student Life Coordinators, tells him that most of Jared's classmates will make it to Rose Building on their own, so he'll have to wait to meet them there later on.

An hour or so later, he finds himself staring up at the NY skyline while they make their way to Lincoln Center Plaza. And suddenly it's real, he's really here, he's really going to do this. He's so ready.

Jensen makes his way out of the airport and onto the AirTrain that will take him to the closest subway station. He avoids Jim and the kids in the terminal, not because he doesn't feel like saying hi, but because there are bound to be some new arrivals and once the word spreads about who his parents are, there's no guessing as to what will happen. And he doesn't want to tell people cool stories about his parents right now. He needs some peace and quiet and the long track back by subway will provide exactly that.

Not that he doesn't love them. His parents are most likely the most awesome parents anybody on the entire planet has, but sometimes it's just a bit overwhelming to be the son of a prima ballerina and one of the most in demand rock stars on the planet. People always want to know how it feels, how it is to be surrounded by famous people and he always feels like he has to tell them some awesome story, while really, to him they are just his parents and their friends. And like all parents they can be strict and overbearing and absolutely irrational when it comes to the important things in life.

Which is why he needs some peace and quiet after having spent eight weeks in Texas, surrounded by their love and questions and inquiries into what his plans are for the future. The future of course is getting scarily close and even though everybody pretends he has lots of choices and important decisions to make, in truth it's practically all planned out. There's a contract with his name on it somewhere in Jeff's desk and the only real question that still needs to be answered is exactly what his job description will be. And that right there is exactly the problem. Rumours have been running rampant about whether or not he'll get offered a spot amongst the soloists and some of the more daring ones even have him lined up as a principal dancer next season.

Both of which are just crazy. If it would be up to Jensen he'd just start out at the bottom. Become a *corps* member and dance stuffy waltzes in the back of the stage. Or he could just go and dance somewhere else. Several European companies are auditioning later on this year and it would be kind of neat to just go and dance in London or Berlin for a few years before he has to step up to the plate and show it all to the home crowd.

But there are so many people right here in New York, who have invested so much time and effort into getting him to this point, getting him into a position that will enable him to skip the lower ranks of one of the best ballet companies in the world and just start out right in the spot light. Last time that happened the program had his Mom's and Jeff's name printed on it, so yeah, absolutely no pressure right there.

And of course there was the never-ending string of question concerning his break up with Danneel. He was fine with it; Danny was fine with it, so why on earth couldn't everybody else be fine with it? But no, they just had to yak on about how she used to fit right in and how they made such a nice couple and at a certain point he just wanted to bash his head against the wall to make them stop. He and Danny had been friends from the day they met at SAB's summer program seven years ago. She'd been just as good at this thing as Jensen and having a prima ballerina as a Mom did not impress her when she was ten and definitely didn't do so later on.

They'd been friends and then they had been a bit more than that and then somewhere before summer break they'd decided to be just friends again. Danny, of course, has some interesting theories about why certain things didn't exactly work, but Jensen's not going to listen to them or to the little voice in his head that is telling him exactly the same. He's got enough on his plate without the added complications of what *that* would mean.

Nope, all he's going to do for the next nine months is dance, be the best and pretend to be happy with all of it.

Jared knows he's not a crappy dancer, if he was he wouldn't be here, but five days in he's about ready to die. His only saving grace is Chad, his roommate extraordinaire, who's making life at least a little bit bearable if not completely worth living.

In the last five days Jared's been prodded, bent and stretched in any possible way and he has dropped at least three petite little girls right onto the floor instead of lifting them up into the air like he should. His body hurts, his ego hurts and right now, dying seems like a great idea, but even that might just take too much effort.

Unfortunately, even dying in peace is asking too much, because the door to his room slams open, swiftly followed by a bouncing Chad.

"Jared, my man you're going to be late for the most awesome class of the week if you don't haul your gigantic ass of that bed right about now."

Jared just groans and turns around facing the wall.

"I think I'm going to quit man," he mutters, trying to find a position on the bed that makes his body hurt less than it is doing right now. "Seriously, Ms. Ferris is just going to moan about how much I suck and about how there can't be more people like Jensen fucking Ackles."

"Dude, you can't just quit after the first week. First week is hard for everybody," Chad continues while falling down on Jared's bed, jostling his body. "And just for your information, people don't quit SAB, they get tossed out and last time I checked Mr. Morgan hasn't ordered you into his office, so you can't be doing half as bad as you think you're doing."

"I dropped Sandy onto the floor yesterday Chad!" Jared exclaims, but Chad just shrugs it off.

"Dude, I've dropped Sandy onto the floor dozens of times in the last five years, she's used to it, she doesn't mind. Actually she told you she didn't mind, I was right there when she did man, so stop whining."

"Doesn't change the fact that I'm apparently not the next Jensen Ackles, stupid jerk."

"Dude, don't blame your incompetence on a guy you never even met. Ackles is an OK guy, man. And anyways, as long as The Ferris yells you shouldn't be all that worried. Now when she stops yelling and simply ignores your existence, that's when you should start packing your bags, amigo. Until then, get your ass out of bed and into studio 2, we've got some dancing to do."

And with that he rolls off Jared's bed and starts rooting through one of his unpacked suitcases in search for a clean pair of tights.

"You might want to unpack that," Jared sighs, heaving himself upright and off the bed. Chad, of course, just ignores him; like he did the last six times Jared suggested unpacking might not be such a bad idea.

Chad is kind of a douche like that. If you'd look at him, his squinty eyes and his faux Mohawk and the big mouth that constantly spouts information you don't want to know, you'd never say he's about to become a classical dancer. But put the guy in a studio and he's not half bad. Actually he's pretty good. This really shouldn't surprise Jared, because Chad's been here for 5 years, and nobody stays at SAB for 5 years if they aren't any good. He sure doesn't go around dropping girls on the floor instead of heaving them into a simple fish dive.

And behind all the bluster and hoo ha, there's a lot of insightful knowledge imparted. Chad's introduced him to at least half the student population and told him in snarky sarcastic whispers about practically every single person they've run into this last week. He knows all the ins and outs about students, teachers, and even company members and doesn't mind sharing.

It's how Jared knows about Misha's long time crush on Sandy, who unfortunately is madly in love with Christian Kane, who in turn graduated last year and is now dancing at ABT, which makes him even more desirable. And that's just some of the torrid love affairs of his closest friends and classmates in the Intermediate Section. There's only one person who's above all of Chad's gossip and that is the illustrious Jensen Ackles.

Jared grabs a clean white t-shirt and a pair of black tights out of his top drawer, tosses them into his dance bag and patiently waits for Chad to do the same. He's ready for another hour of torture.

Jensen seriously needs a cigarette, but unfortunately they all collectively quit before summer break so his friends are no longer supporting his habit.

One week in and things are already back to normal. Ms. Ferris has reached her usual level of exasperated critique on whatever they are doing, Mr. Morgan keeps stalking from class room to class room to observe their progress or the lack thereof, and every single part of his body has been stretched beyond its limits at least once this week. Business as usual.

Apart from the part where there's apparently this new kid in Intermediate who is seriously good if not highly untrained and spectacularly clumsy. He's seen the bruise on Sandy's hip when she came to show Danneel, and she must have smacked good and hard onto the studio floor for it to look like that.

But Sandy didn't seem to mind, because apparently this guy is cute and tall and handsome and really, really good, so he'll learn and once he does she'll finally have somebody decent to dance with. Jensen just rolled his eyes at that. There are plenty of decent dancers in the upper regions of the Intermediate section, Chad for one and Misha ain't all that bad either, so she's got nothing to complain about.

Speaking about Chad, Intermediate should be about done with their Classical Ballet class, which means that Chad and his cigarettes are probably on their way to the back entrance to have a smoke and blow of

some steam after an hour and a half of being yelled and prodded at by The Ferris. And Chad never minds sharing!

Jensen makes his way to the back, through the main hallway, past studio 4 where a group of 12 year old girls are practising double *pirouettes* under the supervision of Mr. Morgan. Jensen can't help but stand there and watch for a second while they give it their best try. He can vividly remember the days, that turning a clean double *pirouette* in order to please Jeff were all that mattered, and the seriousness with which he had tackled the problem. There's a little blonde in the front row that almost has it down to perfection if it wasn't for her face that screws up every time she lounges into the second turn, as if biting her lip and closing her eyes is the only way to get through it clean. She finishes up in *fourth* and when she opens her eyes she stares right at him.

Jensen sticks out his tongue and winks, the girl giggles at his antics.

He knows the exact moment Jeff catches on and by the time he turns around Jensen's on his way again with a wave, a smile on his face.

A nice long pull and nicotine fills his lungs, burns its way through his system and soothes his fraying nerves. Chad's sitting next to him on the railing, legs dangling, where Jared's easily reach the floor. He takes a deep breath, chasing the smoke with fresh humid summer air. Well, as fresh as air can get in New York. He's just made it through an hour and a half of torture at the hand of Ms. Ferris and dinner is calling, but sitting out here, smoking a clandestine cigarette with Chad, like they've been doing every day after class, surrounded by New York City at rush hour, suddenly makes him relax for the first time this week.

He's just about to tell Chad he's ready to go in again when the thick metal door slams open and *Airplane guy* stands in front of them.

"Thank God, you're here Chad," *Airplane guy* says, thumping Chad on the shoulder while jumping onto the railing next to them. He's not as tall as Jared, but the toes of his high tops just about reach the floor, keeping him balanced while he extracts a cigarette out of the packet in Chad's shirt pocket.

Chad just shakes his head and lights the guy's cigarette. "Nice to see you too Jenny; how's first week back treating you?"

"Ferris decided the only word she was going to use on Monday was *plié*, and made us do endless *beats* while yelling it at us, and then Jeff decided we had to practise our big slow deep jumps on Tuesday. By the time it was Wednesday we were all ready to die. If I never have to jump again it's too soon, I'm telling you."

Chad just smirks and shakes his head before they sit back and smoke, silence filling the afternoon air. For a few minutes that's all they do, they sit there and smoke.

Then Chad decides it's time to make fun of Jared.

"Hey, you talked to Sandy yet?" he asks and *Airplane guy* rumples his nose in the cutest way possible before he says, "Yeah, she was at Danny's earlier this week."

Not what Chad was going for obviously.

"Did she show you the bruise?" he crows, like being dropped on the floor and getting banged up is some kind of a trophy.

"Yep, it was quite spectacular, but from what I heard, being dropped flat on your ass by hot, handsome, new guy is totally worth it," he smirks, throwing a look at Jared, who feels the red creep up his neck and onto his face.

Chad of course thinks all of this is hilarious and is laughing his head off. "Yeah, that's what I have been telling my man Jared here, but he seems to think the ladies actually mind being tossed around," he replies thumping Jared's shoulder.

Jensen just smirks back at them, "And that right there, Chad, is why I don't miss having you as my roommate. Life is so much easier without you being there to make a fool out of me"

"Oh, come on don't you even miss me a bit? I mean you room with Steve now, Steve's like totally boring and mellow."

"He unpacks, he cleans, he doesn't snore and he sure as hell doesn't leave his stinky dirty tights underneath my pillow, so where I'm concerned..."

"You did what?" Jared interrupts their friendly banter, looking at the two of them.

"Dude, chill, that was just once and Jenny totally deserved that."

"I did not."

"Man, you jumped a quadruple *tour en air* after which Ferris and Morgan teamed up in order to teach us poor untalented schmucks how to be more like you. You totally deserved that"

"I did not!"

"You can jump a quadruple *tour en air*?" Jared cuts in, awe seeping through his words. Jared manages a clean double any time, a triple on a good day or when he really needs to show of his skills, but a quadruple? A quadruple is major.

Airplane guy just looks at him a little confused, "Yeah," he replies, "sometimes I do."

"That's cool, and by the way, since Chad has no manners what so ever, I'm Jared," he adds quickly, because he wants to know more about this guy and Chad is of no help whatsoever and unlike Chad, Jared's Momma actually taught him some manners. So he sticks out his hand, "Jared Padalecki."

Airplane guy just throws another smirk at Chad and shakes Jared's hand. "Jensen," he introduces himself, "Jensen Ackles."

October 2009 – New York City

Jensen is stretched out on the couch in the student lounge, slowly making his way through *The Deathly Hallows*, when Jared drops onto the floor right next to him stretching out his legs while dropping his head on the couch pillow, arm flung over his eyes.

"I'm going to be sent home," he sighs.

Jensen can't help but chuckle. Jared can be an overachieving drama queen and the *Adagio* class he's just come from usually brings out the worst of it.

"Did you drop any girls onto the floor?"

"No," Jared snaps, whacking him in the side.

"Did you screw up any of the steps beyond repair?" Jensen continues.

No answer. *Right*.

"Well even if you did, it's not the end of the world. You'll just need a bit more time to get the hang of it," he tries, which apparently was the wrong thing to say, because catatonic Jared suddenly turns into furious Jared who jumps up and towers over Jensen, fists clenched to his sides.

"Just – just shut up already Jensen, because you have absolutely no idea what it means to suck at something, because you are fucking Jensen Ackles and you were born with freakin' perfect technique and a truckload of talent whereas some of us mere mortals actually have to work for it every now and then!"

And with that he storms of right into a group of little girls who are looking at the two of them in sheer terror.

Shit.

Just, shit, what was that?

He gets up to go after Jared, but instead decides to go and find out what happened first. Jared probably needs some time to cool down and get whatever it is that is bothering him out of his system. He's on his way to Chad's room, when he walks past Danneel's and sees Sandy is in. She's been dancing with Jared, so she probably knows what's bothering him.

"Ladies, apparently my existence is enough to get yelled at by an angry yeti, any idea why?"

Danneel just shakes her head at the nickname that Chad christened Jared with two weeks in and presses a kiss against his head when he sits down on her bed. She thinks it is funny how Jared and Jensen have become friends overnight, teaming up against Chad and making the poor guy's life miserable. It's all in good fun of course and Chad gives as good as he gets, so nobody is all that worried. Jared bugging Jensen, however, is a completely different matter.

Her hand slips underneath his shirt, drawing lazy circles into his back and he leans back against her, unconsciously relaxing into her soothing movements. She knows he doesn't like to get yelled at, no matter what, and if Jared wasn't an overgrown puppy, she would probably be half way through the building to tell him off.

They both look expectantly at Sandy, who just takes in the entire scene on Danneel's bed and shakes her head.

"For two people who officially broke up, the two of you are being rather cosy over there," she starts of, smirking at them. Jensen leans back a bit more in answer to that while Danneel's other hand finds its way into his hair, smoothing it flat onto his head.

Sandy just laughs at them.

"Idiots!" she sighs before continuing, "Nothing happened really: we had *Adagio* class, Jared gave it his best shot, Mr. Kripke hated on us all but especially on Jared and to point out our levels of utter incompetence he used you, dear Jensen, as the epitome of class and style we should all try to reach up to. Repeatedly!"

Danneel rolls her eyes at the dramatics. Jensen just sighs; it figures that would be what happened.

"And when I say repeatedly," Sandy continues, "I mean every time Jared took a wrong step or turn or was too late with a lift or in general looked like a beaten puppy instead of a dashing prince. He's just trying really hard to catch up with the rest of us and he's getting there, but Kripke doesn't care, he just sees all the wrongs and none of the rights and I'm guessing you just ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, honey, and got the full load of it."

And yeah, that sounded exactly like Kripke, who could turn a rock into a quivering mess and had absolutely no problem with picking on the weak.

"Brilliant," he mutters, "I wish they would just stop using my name whenever they need to set an example. It would make it a bit easier to be around other people."

"Don't mope Ackles," Danneel cuts in before he can get into a real rant. "In case you hadn't noticed, nobody in this room is in awe of your amazing talents. We are just as good if not better than you." She says it with such an air of arrogance and conviction that all three of them start laughing out loud, lightening the mood.

He's got great friends at least, who don't care about where he comes from or who his parents are. They know he works just as hard as they do, puts in just as much effort and time and sweat and tears and most importantly they know that even Jensen Ackles is only human.

They were there when it all went to pieces 2 years ago when his knee decided that enough was enough and in the aftermath of the operation that should have fixed it once and for all. They've seen him struggle to get back to pre-op form and they know, they just know that it's not all that great to be Jensen Ackles. They know to ignore the endless platitudes about his greatness and just do their own thing. They are used to it. Jared clearly isn't.

"So what am I going to do about this?" he ventures, not sure about how to fix something he had no hand in.

"You," Danneel says, while pushing him upright, "will go and find Jared and be you. Because you might be a crappy dancer, but you're definitely a good friend, and you'll know what to do when you get there."

Right, crappy girl advice. He should have gone to Chad.

Jared is sitting in their usual spot, but nothing, not the cigarette, not the fresh air and definitely not the noise, seems to be able to calm him down.

He's a joke, an utter failure and to make things worse, he took it all out on Jensen, who really had nothing to do with it at all. If it's anybody's fault it's his own, because Jared spent too much of his time at a small town dance studio in San Antonio, Texas because he couldn't decide whether or not to pursue a career in dance. And in small San Antonio dance studios there usually is a lack of boys and no time for such trivial things as *adagio* and partnering.

He hates *adagio* and he absolutely abhors partnering. It's the ancient art of standing around on stage while making the girls look pretty. It's outdated and stupid and it says absolutely nothing about Jared's talent or skills or...

The opening of the heavy metal door cuts off his subconscious rant and when he turns around Jensen is standing there.

Jensen, who Jared is secretly falling in love with a little bit more day after day even though he knows this isn't going anywhere. Jensen, who needs a moment to get with the program, but once he's done being shy is one of the funniest, smartest, sarcastic people Jared knows. Jensen, who just got yelled at by an irate Jared, but still came to check on him.

"You done with the yelling," is all he says, lighting a cigarette and hopping right onto the railing.

"Yeah, I guess," Jared answers, feeling more and more like a big fat jerk. He studies the tips of his sneakers for a while, not saying anything, but when he looks up, Jensen is still sitting there, looking at him.

"I'm sorry," he manages after a while, "you know, for yelling at you, wasn't your fault, I just had to-" he trails off. He just had to blow off some steam and Jensen had very conveniently been there minding his own business until Jared threw his at him.

"Yeah well," Jensen says, a little smile playing around his lips, "Kripke has that effect on all us every now and then, so no hard feelings."

"Kripke makes you want to hit something really hard?"

Jensen chuckles, "Nah, but he had me close to tears repeatedly last year, which makes Danny want to hit him really hard. Does that count?"

Jared can imagine what that must have looked like. Danneel Harris scares the hell out of him. She's nice and all, but she keeps her eyes on him whenever he's around Jensen and she has this look in them that says more than words ever could. If he ever has the nerve to hurt Jensen, he'll have to deal with Harris, and chances are he won't live to tell the story. According to Chad this is normal behaviour, but Jared can't help but think that she's on to him, looks through him with ease and knows exactly what he wants from Jensen even if he would never act on it.

"Why?" he asks, because by now he's actually had a chance to see Jensen dancing and he's just as good as everybody says, so he can't imagine Kripke throwing a fit about it.

"I was coming right out of major knee surgery and right after, nothing worked like it should for the longest of times, you know. I had no balance and no stretch and all the power was gone out of my jumps. It all took a while to get back to a reasonable level and Kripke never has time for other people's schedules. He strictly works on his own and everybody who slows him down or keeps lagging behind gets to feel it. Even the great and magnificent Jensen Ackles."

There's something tangible bitter in how he says it. And somehow Jared gets it. Jensen is always used as this shining example, but apparently they don't pay him the same courtesy when things are not going as planned.

He wants to say something to make it better, but Jensen suddenly seems to notice his own sullen mood and with a grin says, "You want to come for a walk? Get your mind away from all of this crap? See a bit more of this town than the four outer walls of Rose?"

They're not really supposed to leave the premises unsupervised Jared thinks, but Jensen looks so excited about just getting out of here for a moment that Jared just nods.

"Great, we can walk over to the park and get something truly horrendous for dinner on our way and eat it there. You ever been to *Central Park*?" he continues, while they make their way inside. Jared tells him no and Jensen rattles on about the greatness that is *Central Park* while he walks them through parts of the building Jared has never been in and is quite sure are prohibited to students.

"Are we allowed to be here?" he asks, when Jensen punches in a security code in yet another door, which leads right into the backstage area of the theater.

"Nope, but we're also not supposed to be out without permission or to miss dinner, but it's not like they are checking and if they really would like to keep us inside and out of here, they should have changed the codes a long time ago."

Right.

"I never took you for the rule breaking kind Ackles."

Jensen just looks over his shoulder while making his way through the narrow hallway and smirks at Jared. "My daddy is a rock star Padalecki, I'm genetically programmed to break rules."

And with that he punches in one last code and they're outside on Columbus Avenue, traffic steadily making its way along the street.

New York in October is strangely warm, Jared thinks, while Jensen leads him through the streets on their way to the park. They stop at a place called *Carlo's Burritos*, which looks like a true health hazard, but the burrito Jensen insists on buying for Jared must be made in heaven so Jared's not complaining. They take what Jensen call the touristy route and enter the park at *Columbus Circle* and Jensen expertly guides them to one of the big meadows where he stretches out onto the grass.

"I love the park," he sighs, while chewing on his burrito. And Jared has to agree, *Central Park* on an October afternoon is not bad at all.

They just lie there for what seems to be forever until Jensen suddenly speaks up, "Maybe we can practice."

The confusion must have been clear on Jared's face, because Jensen just grins at him before he continues, "With the partnering I mean. I'm sure we can find some ladies willing to be dropped onto their faces if it means they'll get to spend some quality time with a cute guy like you."

And although that's actually a great idea, Jared smacks him, because really this entire 'the girls think you're so cute' thing Chad and Jensen have going on is getting old real quick.

"Aww, I'm trying to help here, you know!"

"Dude, you are so not trying to help, you are making fun of my misery."

"No way."

"You totally are."

"Not with the practice part, that was serious. I'd help, you know?"

"You'd help how? By standing there laughing your head off?"

"Nah, I'll just get Danny to come and we can practice as well. It never hurts to get in some extra time and we'll end up dancing in something together sooner than later anyways so we might as well be prepared. Also, that way you'll have somebody to show you how not to do it."

"Why, thank you, you are so kind." Jared snarks back, but really he likes this idea of Jensen's more and more.

"Maybe we can ask Sandy," he suggests. "She's in my class, and she and Danneel are friends, so that way they can still hang out while helping my sorry ass."

"Dude, as much as that sounds like a plan, you're just making this way too easy for me."

"What? You think she won't do it?"

"Of course she'll do it, if only because you know, you're so damn-"

This time Jared pounces before Jensen can even finish that sentence and doesn't stop before he has him in a headlock which he has to let go of because they are both laughing so hard.

"Dude it's not really such a bad thing you know," Jensen says while trying to get up.

"Actually it is," Jared replies while getting up himself. This would be it then. Time to come clean. "Cause I'm not really that much into girls and I hate blowing them off when they finally get their courage up and start to ask me out."

It might have come out a bit rushed and he's definitely not looking Jensen in the eye while he says it, busying himself with brushing grass off of his pants.

When he's done and there's really no reason left to just stand there like a moron staring at his pants, he looks up just to meet Jensen's steady gaze. And the ridiculously big smirk on his face.

"It's not funny Jensen," he huffs and stalks off, but he can hear Jensen follow right behind him and before he knows it there's an arm slung around his shoulder.

"Dude, that's so no reason to get your knickers in a twist and stalk off. Seriously, this is ballet land. We would be surprised if you were actually straight. Now what is really bad, is the fact that I owe Chad 20 bucks no thanks to you."

"You made a bet with Chad about my sexual orientation?" Jared doesn't know if he should be offended or just plain simple mad, but one look at the disgruntled look on Jensen's face makes him grin instead.

"Serves you right you lost, you moron. You roomed with Chad for 3 years, you should know better than bet against him. Also, I own pink shirts, it's a dead give away."

Jensen just bumps into him with his shoulder instead of telling him to shut up and suddenly it feels good, walking around New York with Jensen at his side, making fun of something he'd been really afraid of telling. Apparently it doesn't matter if you find the right people to tell.

Part Two

November 2009 - New York

"One...two...three...four...deeper *plié* Jared, it will get you up even higher...seven...eight. Let's run through that entire sequence again gentlemen and try to keep it crisp, keep the lines straight, we are not a circus act, this is ballet."

Jared has never been this much out of breath and his legs feel like gummy, but the jumping sequence they are running through is absolute perfection and he'd rather die than stop doing it at this moment. It also helps that Ms. Ferris has apparently deemed him good enough to be worthy of a compliment. Well, maybe not a compliment, but there's a decided lack of insults and references to Jensen's greatness of late and Jared takes what he can get.

The music starts again and he gets ready to fall in when the first group of dancers is half way through the studio. Chad is standing next to him puffing out breath after breath, counting out the beats for the both of them so they'll be ready to start in time with the music.

They start off next to each other, fall into the *tombe, pas de bourree, pirouette* combination that is so ingrained into his mind he could do it asleep. The turn goes nicely, but really who cares about turns. He launches out of it with a series of *grand jetés* followed by a series of *beats*, and although his calves are burning he sinks into his *plies* just that little bit deeper, feels the stretch bite good and well before he releases it and propels up into the jump. *Jeté, jeté, changement, glissade, jeté, jeté, assemble*; he moves through the series into a *balancé-turned waltz-balancé* sequence that sets them up for the big finale. He has lost Chad somewhere along the way, but he can still hear him somewhere to his left and back, so he's not all that worried that they will collide and takes off. *Grand jeté, turn, grand jeté, turn, assemble* and then from the landing right into a triple *tour en air* that he sticks perfectly onto the studio floor when he lands and heaves his arms into the final position.

Life like this is pretty awesome.

Jensen walks into the studio while Ms. Ferris announces one last run through of the jumping sequence they are practicing and from the looks of it she's been running them hard. Chad looks like he's going to keel over if he has to take one more step, but lines up next to Jared anyways.

Jensen dumps his bag next to Steve's and starts stretching on the floor, first his left leg, then his right. By the time he sinks into a side split, Jared and Chad start their sequence and boy are they a sight. Well Chad looks about dead on his feet, but Jared, Jared is flying. He aces jump after jump, turns an amazing quadruple *pirouette* before he sets off into a series of *beats* that are so crisp and clean and high that even Ms. Ferris starts to notice. By the time they hit the home stretch Chad is severely lacking behind, but gets overtaken on the way back by Jared's soaring *grand jetés*. When he finishes by sticking his *tour en air* into a perfect fifth position without even the slightest bit of a wobble in sight, Jensen can't help himself, he lets out an ear splitting whistle and the look on Jared's face is well worth it. Clearly, he's found his stride.

November, Jensen thinks later that week, is as crazy as ever. It's when everybody has been here long enough to have settled in and find their stride which means the faculty gets ready to throw them another round of curve balls.

In Jensen's case they come disguised by an email. An email that reads, 'You've been selected to dance in this year's production of the *Nutcracker*, please come to my office tomorrow at noon for further details – Mr. Morgan'.

It makes him really happy and really nervous all at once. The only thing that makes it even more nerve wracking but also more exciting is the fact that Danneel gets the exact same email.

A day later, sitting in Jeff's office listening to the details, reality starts to truly sink in. They are going to dance the *Trepak*, a part that has been specifically re-choreographed for them. This is a big fucking deal and they know it.

Jeff knows it.

And he's sure Ms. Ferris and Mr. Kripke who are sitting left and right of him know so as well.

This is not just a cute little kid part, this is them being a part of the actual performance. It will also be them showing the public and the board of NYCB that yes, they might be young and slightly inexperienced, but they are definitely up to the job.

The job that keeps getting closer with every single day they spend practising at SAB. This is where they either excel or fail. Practically in a nutshell, they've just been handed their careers on a silver platter. It's up to them to do something with it.

Jared's been sitting in the cafeteria waiting for Jensen for half an hour now. They were supposed to have lunch and then hit the studio with Sandy and Danneel to have another go at this entire partnering thing. Jared's getting better and better at it, up to the level that Sandy has appointed him as her official partner in class. Speaking of Sandy, she's sitting a table down from him, looking like she's been stood up as well.

"Hey," he greets her when he walks over with his tray, "you waiting for Danneel?"

"Yeah, she and Jensen had to go see Mr. Morgan about something just before lunch."

"What did they do now?" Jared asks. Usually having to see Mr. Morgan means only one thing, you're in trouble. And he's been spending enough time with Jensen and Danneel lately to know that they know far too many ways of getting into trouble. Luckily they are almost just as good at damage control.

"Don't know," Sandy replies, "but I don't think they are in trouble. It could be dance related; maybe somebody wants to have some of us to dance at a charity event or something like that. Usually stuff like

that goes through Mr. Morgan first. And the two of them would be perfect for something like that, don't you think?"

"Sure, although I'd say we would be pretty awesome as well." Jared quips and that earns him a little smile.

"Yeah, I think so too!"

That's when Danneel walks into the cafeteria looking white like a sheet and Jared and Sandy are up and at her side before she can get another three steps in.

Sandy's "Oh, Danny what happened?" gets totally drowned out by Jared's "Where is Jensen and what is going on?" and Danneel just stares at them bewildered.

"I'm fine," she starts to explain, but she is cut off again by Sandy's, "You don't look fine to me."

"No, no I'm really fine, just overwhelmed and maybe a bit scared."

They just stare at her to continue, although Jared thinks something must be seriously wrong with the Universe because Danneel Harris does not do scared.

"Jeff – I mean, Mr. Morgan, he re-choreographed this year's Nutcracker, and he wants us to dance one of the new parts. The *Russian dance*, to be exact."

Sandy squeals and starts to hug her and Jared would follow if it wasn't for the fact that one person hugging Danneel at once is probably more than enough, and this still doesn't answer his question.

"Danneel," he breaks off their little happy hugging dance of girly giggling, "where's Jensen?"

"Oh," she says, turning around, "he was right behind me when we left the office."

"Well he's obviously not right behind you anymore!"

And yes that might have come out a bit too strong if the looks on their faces say anything at all, but it's true, because Jensen is not there and that, at least to Jared, feels like it is a very big deal.

Danneel looks like she's thinking it over as well and then simply says, "Try the guy's restroom near studio 3 and drag him over to have lunch once you're done all right?"

And with that said, she turns around, grabbing Sandy's hand to go and spread the happy news.

Stupid girls!

So Jared makes his way to the restroom to find Jensen. Jensen who's currently doing an excellent job at puking up his guts if the sounds he's hearing are any indication.

"Jen, you alright?" he asks making his way over to the last cubicle and slowly pushing open the door.

"I'm peachy," he says, not moving from his spot on the floor, "never been better."

"So I hear, Mr. 'they choreographed a part just for me'. Which leaves the question; what are you doing on the floor hugging that toilet bowl?"

And with that he sinks onto the floor next to Jensen, even though it's a real tight fit, two six foot something guys in one small cubicle, and softly bumps his shoulder.

"Big deal, huh?"

"I don't think they invented a word yet for how big a deal this is." Jensen replies after a while.

"You'll be great though," Jared tries.

"Or I'll suck and fall flat on my face in front of 2500 people."

"Pessimist."

"Let's talk again when it's your career on the line, alright."

Sure, like that was ever going to happen. And then he has a brilliant thought.

"Hey, you know what?"

"What?"

"It will be fine, you know, we'll just practice. I hear it helps."

Jensen looks at him incredulous. "Did you just quote my own idiotic advice back at me?"

"Yup, I'm totally seeing it. Sandy and I will help you guys out. Show you how not to do it. It will be great! And if you fall and break your neck, we would be all ready to step in for you. Now isn't that a great back up plan?" he continues, grin splitting his face. And it's working because Jensen has let go of the toilet bowl and is grinning back at him.

"Sometimes, I seriously hate you Padalecki!"

"Nah, you love me, you just don't want to admit it."

He only realises what he just said once it all came out and he can feel the blush creeping up his cheeks. The fact that he might be a teeny tiny bit in love with his best friend doesn't mean he feels the same about Jared. He should seriously try to remember that!

If Jensen notices, he doesn't do anything about it, instead he just leans a bit more into Jared and the wall behind them. They stay there for a bit longer before Jared's stomach makes it loud and clear that it needs feeding and he drags the both of them off to the cafeteria.

December 2009 – Somewhere up in the air between New York and Dallas.

If anybody asked him what he had done the last two months, Jared would be hard pressed to answer. Well, dance of course, but that wouldn't be the whole of it. Truth was the last six weeks had been over before he even blinked. The last quiet moment he remembered was sitting on a restroom floor, cheering up a cranky Jensen sitting next to him.

After that, hell had practically broken loose. As promised, Jared and Sandy had unofficially appointed themselves as understudy for Jensen and Daneel's Nutcracker pas de deux and even if they had been banned from the official rehearsals at first, everybody involved had quickly caught on. At a certain point, nobody really cared if they showed up to watch or participate in the background while Mr. Morgan together with Ms. Ferris and Kripke had them rehearse the parts.

And it had been an awesome part, even Jensen had grudgingly admitted as much. At 1:14 minutes it was rather short, but short meant absolutely nothing when it came to this piece of music. And Mr. Morgan had choreographed a sequence that was anything but easy going. It practically was one big jump sequence only interrupted by two sets of turns and a flashy lift that scared Jared just by looking at it.

So they practiced and if Jared had to be honest, he could do without hearing that specific piece of music ever again. The rest of the time had been spent making Jensen unwind and relax, which had gotten considerably harder the closer they came to opening night, and if it hadn't been for Chad and his devious ways, Jared might have just entirely failed at it the last week.

He couldn't understand how somebody as great as Jensen could be so insecure about his own abilities to perform. He was, in one word *fantastic*, but didn't seem to see it. Luckily Danneel and Chad had spent more than enough time with a performance nervous Jensen to know about the essentials, which were quite easy; make sure he sleeps and eats and doesn't get over trained.

Which was easier said than done.

Especially the 'get Jensen to eat' part. The guy could pack on a few more pounds in the best of times, but now with all the practise and rehearsals and their normal classes, eating was quite essential. But apparently a nervous Jensen translated into a Jensen without appetite and they had to resort to breaking the rules more than once to get him to eat anything at all. Carlo's burritos apparently were something even nervous Jensen couldn't say no to and it wasn't too long until Jared knew every single security code on their way out of the building just as well as anybody else.

They all had tickets for the show on a Saturday afternoon sponsored by SAB, but they decided to spring for a set of coveted orchestra centre seats for the premiere. Or to quote Sandy, "Our best friends make their official theatre debut only once, so don't be a cheap ass, Chad!"

They'd been fantastic both times of course, being all raw power and speed wrapped up in unbelievable grace and strength for dancers so young and without much stage experience. The critics had raved, the crowds had clapped their hands off and Jensen and Danneel definitely found their stride sometime half way through the schedule and aced performance after performance without even blinking an eye.

Jensen was sleeping in the window seat right next to Jared right now, exhausted but extremely happy for the first time in weeks. He'd danced 21 shows in the last 2 weeks next to his normal schedule of classes and rehearsals and if that didn't give him the right to sleep through the flight back home to Texas, Jared wouldn't know what did. The *New York Times* Art section with the review of the show was crumpled up in his right hand. They had gushed of course, had put a big picture of Jensen and Danneel right next to the review and spent an entire paragraph raving about up and coming talent. Jensen had refused to read any of it until it was all over and they had boarded the plane back home. He's not sure he even made it half way through before falling asleep.

Jensen wakes up when the plane hits the Dallas tarmac. He's still holding the *New York Times* he had been reading when he nodded off, his own face staring back at him. It's kind of crumpled, but he's sure there will be at least a dozen copies around the house so he isn't too worried. Jared is slouching in his chair next to him, long legs stretched out into the aisle.

"Dude, stewardesses are going to fall over your paws."

"Oh, look," Jared shoots back, "it's alive."

"Yeah, sorry about that, I'm usually much better company. Didn't mean to fall asleep on you."

"Never mind man, you were exhausted and we all know you could definitely use the sleep."

They make their way out of the plane and into the terminal, saying their goodbyes when Jensen had to take a left to baggage claim, Jared continuing on to catch his connecting flight to San Antonio.

Jensen isn't any good at this entire goodbye, see you later thing, but luckily for him Jared has no sense of personal space and wraps him up in a big Padalecki hug, the kind Jensen tells himself he really hates, but at the same time seems to enjoy far too much. Jared's hugs just make him feel safe and taken care of, and these last few weeks they've saved him from going under more than once.

"Get some more rest, OK?" Jared murmurs in his ear. "And for God's sake, eat. I can feel your ribs right now and I'm not liking it." He starts to let go, but Jensen clings on just a bit longer before he gets his act together and draws back. All of this is just weird, but he could care less about any of it.

"Sure, Mom!" he counters bumping Jared's shoulder and sending him on his way to his gate. "Don't sit on your momma's couch and stuff yourself to the brink Padalecki," he says to send his friend off. "It would be such a shame if you undo all the good work we did these last few months."

Jared's only reply is his middle finger and a big grin before he rounds a corner and disappears.

Time to face the music, Jensen thinks, heading to pick up his bags. His parents and little sister had made it down for the show a week ago and although his mom had been all proud, full of compliments and hugs, it had been clear from the moment she laid eyes on Jensen that she had some choice words to say about what it was doing to him personally.

Once his bags come out, he makes his way through customs and through the sliding doors into arrivals and before he can even look around he's swept up into another bear hug, courtesy of his big brother Josh, who to Jensen's annoyance still has an inch on him in height and a few more across his shoulders.

"Put me down Josh," he says, thumping his brother shoulder until he does exactly that. Josh just grins, picks up his bags and starts to walk to the exit.

"You could be a little more grateful little bro, I'm saving you a few more minutes from the Spanish inquisition in case you hadn't figured."

Jensen sighs, "I'm fine really, and Mom's just being Mom you know. She worries too much."

"Yeah well, if you want to keep up that line of argument, make sure she doesn't get her hands on you for a while, because that sweater isn't doing all that good of a job hiding the missing pounds underneath it."

Jensen rolls his eyes. He knows all right, he knows.

"So tell me, how was the show," Josh changes the topic. "I totally tried to make it but finals were slightly kicking my ass."

Jensen grins. "You might want to try studying in advance, I hear it helps."

"Yeah, yeah, mister I got my GED when I was fifteen, so all I have to focus on now is dance. I'd like to see you have a try at college before you start handing out smart ass advice."

Jensen just leans into the window and smiles. He's missed this, missed his family and the easy banter they have going on permanently. Josh knows what it means to be an Ackles, even though he took the easy way out and went off to do something totally unrelated to what their parents did.

He still gets hassled for autographs and stories, Jensen knows. And he knows Josh loads it as much as he does.

"So to get back to the topic Jen, the show, give me all the details?"

"It went all right," Jensen says, dozing off a bit while the car makes its way through Dallas' rush hour traffic.

"Mmmm," Josh adds, "according to the *New York Times*, things went a bit better than all right Jen."

"It was kind of cool," Jensen admits, "you know, dancing in front of that many people night after night. And we did well, Danny and me. At least I think we did. Didn't screw up too much. But it's kind of intense and absolutely exhausting as well."

That earns him a chuckle, and apparently Josh gets the hint because he turns up the radio and lets Jensen doze off.

Being back home, Jared decides, is kind of awesome, but also strange. He's lived here his entire life, knows these people better than anybody else, but ever since he's back he can't help but miss his new home away from home. Sure he's glad to see his parents and to catch up on what Megan and Jeff have been doing, but there's something missing.

He can't sleep at night because it's too quiet. No Chad who snores louder than a bulldozer, no traffic passing his building at all times, no ambulances screeching their way through the night.

He misses the routine he so easily slipped into. Dance, schoolwork, dance, homework, dance. But what he misses most, if he is honest with himself, is Jensen. Here in San Antonio there's nobody who sneaks out onto the terrace with him to smoke an illicit cigarette. Nobody to plan Chad's demise with, nobody to talk to about dance and careers and what to do with all of it.

He wonders if Jensen is doing all right, if he's making up for the last few weeks of stress and hard work or if he is being his stubborn self, never admitting that it all had taken its toll.

He's lounging on the terrace when his cell phone rings from somewhere in the house, filling it with the sounds of 'Empire state of mind'. By the time he locates the phone it has stopped ringing, but the name on the missed call display makes him grin.

He walks back onto the terrace, drops down onto the porch swing and presses the return call button. The moment the line gets picked up, his world swings right back into line.

"Hi, hold on for a second," Jensen's voice sounds through the line and Jared can hear he's in a room full of people but making his way to somewhere a lot more quiet. Once the background noise dies down a bit, Jared decides he's waited long enough. "Hey there, Merry Christmas!"

He can hear Jensen beam through the phone, "Merry Christmas to you too Jay. Thought you might be busy when I called just now."

"Nah, just didn't have the phone on me and I had to run through half the house to get to it. Are you at a party or something?"

Jensen laughs into the phone, "No, we just have my Dad's entire band and half of Mom's company over for after Christmas brunch. It's kind of an Ackles family tradition of sorts."

"Mmm, a house full of rock stars and dancers, I could imagine worse ways of spending my holidays," Jared replies. "Everything alright?" he adds, because he's never been one to beat around the bush and he has been worried, just a bit, but still.

Jensen chuckles, "Remind me to never introduce you to my Mom," he starts off, "'cause between the two of you I'll never get a moment of rest."

"So she's been taking care of you then?" Jared continues undisturbed.

"Yep, had me sleep and eat the moment I entered the house. I'm fine really, nothing to worry about."

"If you say so," Jared says, not believing a word of it. "Did you get anything cool for Christmas?"

"Yep, and because I'm all kinds of awesome I got you something as well."

That leaves Jared speechless for a second, because sure he got Jensen a present as well, but he wasn't really expecting something back.

"You still there Jay?" Jensen sounds amused and Jared doesn't know what to think of it, but yeah he should get his act together now!

"Sure, is it cool?"

"I'm so not telling man, you'll just have to wait and see."

"Oh, come on man, give me at least a hint," Jared whines, giving Jensen the best puppy dog eyes he can conjure up even though he can't see them.

"Nope, no can do my friend, you'll just have to wait and see until we are back on solid New York ground."

"I hate you," Jared sighs into the phone, "and I kind of miss SAB. Does that make me weird?"

Jensen's laugh once again finds its way to Jared, "Nah, it's normal I'd say. I always want to go back home real bad for the holidays but once I'm here it's just too quiet and there's not all that much to do and I start missing New York. Works exactly the same the other way around though. Just wait until you're back in a week and Chad keeps you up half the night sawing trees in his sleep. You'll miss the Texas quiet before you know it."

"It's a no win scenario," Jared crows. "Jensen we are doomed."

And they just laugh loud and hard at Jared's antics and he thinks he could manage another week out here if he could just hear Jensen's voice every now and then.

"Hey," Jensen skips in, "I have to go, I'm about to be missed and I have to kick some ass at poker, but I'll call you later this week alright? We can see if we can get back to the city together."

"Alright, see you soon."

"See you dude, don't get too fat!"

"Bye Jensen!"

"Bye."

Part Three

January 2010 - New York

They don't make it back to the city on the same plane, but they arrive close enough to wait for each other. Instead of taking the SAB shuttle, Jensen takes Jared back to school the good old-fashioned way, with a detour. When they get out of the subway, they are no where near SAB, but Jensen just shrugs and drags Jensen down a street and into a coffee shop where he sits down surrounded by their bags and sniffs the fresh smell of coffee.

"We don't have to be back for some time," he says after a while, "and they have awesome coffee here. Or hot chocolate if you want."

Jared definitely wants and, as always when it comes to finding the best of New York's dining establishments, Jensen is right about this one. Not only do they pour a decent hot chocolate, they also have blueberry muffins that are to die for, and brownies that Jared would like to take home and hide. However, Jensen stops him from buying them because apparently, Chad has a sixth sense for hidden chocolate treasure. He seriously needs to get another room mate!

They just sit there and talk for a while, when suddenly Danneel comes in, clearly fresh off a plane as well. She smirks at them from the counter where she's putting in her order before she comes to join them.

"Gentlemen, how was your break," she asks before bending over and kissing them both on the cheek. "Jen, are you sharing all our secret hiding spots with the yeti nowadays?"

Jensen blushes, but answers none the less. "It's not like it's a secret Danny and we were in dire need of coffee. Well, I was. Jared is still an unspoiled kid, drinks his hot chocolate."

Jared frowns, Danneel smirks and Jensen just sits there looking smug. Things are back to normal.

Later that night, when Steve's off to practice and Jensen is alone in their room, unpacking and listening to some of the new songs Jeff got him to put on his *iPod*, Danneel slips into the room, flops down on Jensen's bed, and just gives him that look.

Jensen is going to ignore it, he really is. There's nothing to tell, nothing to share. He's doing nothing wrong. Him and Jared, they are just friends.

Ignoring Danneel, however, has never been his forte.

And she can be damn annoying when she's silently staring him down.

"What," he snaps after a while, done unpacking and about ready to get his bed back, thank you very much.

"You tell me Jen," is the expected reply.

"There's absolutely nothing to tell!"

"Really now?"

"Yes!"

She just rolls her pretty eyes at him.

"How were your holidays then?"

Alright, he can do small talk; small talk is no problem at all.

"Fine, everybody was back home and we had a good time. Mom was worried, but in the end I managed to convince her that everything was just fine and she backed down. Dad says hi. Wants to know how his favourite ex-daughter in law is doing. How was Christmas in Miami?"

"The usual," she replies, "so did you get me a present?"

"What?" Jensen stammers and he knows he's screwed. Danneel has gotten a Christmas present ever since they first met, no matter what. But this year-

"Did you get me a present Jen?"

"Well," he tries to stall.

"Did you get something for Jared?"

And that right there is the problem, because he did. He got Jared the most awesome present and he totally forgot about Danneel because he was too busy with getting it just right.

"If I did, will you be mad at me?" he ventures.

She just smirks, "No, not really, although I totally expect a present to magically appear on my bed one of these days. It does however get us back right on track, don't you think?" she adds. "Anything you want to tell me Jen?"

"I- I just, it's not like anything happened. Or will happen. I just-"

And what, he just what? He's not sure what this is, if he wants it to be there. All he knows is that Jared somehow made his way underneath Jensen's skin and he can't, for the love of God, just can't seem to get rid of him. Doesn't want to either, because it's nice, nicer than he's been feeling for a long while. But it also confuses him and he just doesn't know what to do about it.

"You just really like him don't you?"

"Yeah," Jensen sighs, sitting down next to where she's curled up on his bed.

"That's not a bad thing Jen," she prods.

"I know, it's just- don't you think it's weird, especially since you are my ex-girlfriend?"

"Maybe it's why I am your ex-girlfriend Jensen." She smirks up at him.

"God," he exclaims and crashes down next to her, slowly curling his limbs around her.

"God has obviously nothing to do with it," Danneel jokes.

Jensen just lies there, quietly breathing in the strawberry smell of Danneel's shampoo. It would be so much easier if he could just like this the way he should.

"Hey," she breaks his thoughts, "don't worry about it, OK? It's going to be fine. You are going to be fine."

"My parents," Jensen starts, but Danneel finishes his sentence for him, "will be fine with it as well. Last time I checked they know more than enough people who are perfectly happy being anything but heterosexual."

"But Dad," Jensen tries again, but Danneel won't have any of it. She turns around in his arms and stares him right in the eye. "You listen to me now Jensen. It is going to be fine! You are going to be fine. Your parents will not stop loving you because you happen to love a big uncoordinated yeti. They will be fine

with it. Your Dad will most definitely be fine with it. So will be everybody else. All we ever want for you is to be happy. Do you hear me? Just be happy, that's what's important. All the other shit is just a pile of unimportant details."

"You obviously missed out on your career as motivational speaker." Jensen mumbles into her neck, and Danneel huffs, but the elbow that finds its way into his ribs lacks the force it would usually have.

"So," she whispers, "Jared, huh?"

"Yeah, he's just-"

"Hot? Cute? Enormous?" Danneel starts ticking off on her fingers.

"Try nice and funny and an awesome dancer," Jensen adds.

She just smiles up at him.

"What?" he whispers.

"You're in love," she smiles at him, "really in love. It's kind of cute, Jensen Ackles."

She kisses his forehead and starts to untangle their limbs, crawling to the edge of his bed.

With another kiss and a "Get some sleep so you can woo your man tomorrow!" she slips out of his room.

Jensen just lies there, staring at his ceiling. Woo Jared. Exactly how do you woo your gay best friend who thinks you are straight?

"Oh my God!" is the only thing Jared can come up with once he and Jen manage to sit down the next days to exchange Christmas gifts. He's sure he didn't do too bad in the 'great gift' department and Jensen really seemed to like his present, but this – this is just absolutely unfucking believable.

"Oh my God, do you know what this is?" he exclaims loudly once more holding the ticket in his hands, not caring about the fact that practically everybody in the student lounge can hear. Jensen just grins back at him, smirk firmly in place from the moment Jared opened the envelope and took out the concert ticket.

"Man, this is just so – so awesome! I mean I've never even been in Madison Square Garden; hell I've never been to a concert this size in my life. And this is an all access VIP ticket. Do they even sell those?"

And then he suddenly hears his own words and starts to worry. Because yes, an all access VIP ticket for the opening concert of *Kings of Suburbia*'s world tour in Madison Square Garden is the best gift ever, but it must have cost a ton and he knows that Jensen has to get by on just as much as everybody else out here, so he really can't take it.

"Dude, it's too much man," he starts out quietly, not so eager anymore for anybody else to hear. "This must have cost a fortune, I can't take it."

The frown on Jensen's face makes him look even more adorable than usual, but is gone as quick as it appeared, replaced by a grin.

"Jared," he says, and it doesn't sound like he's offended or mad, more like he's having trouble to keep his laughter from ringing out through the room, "you are aware of who my Dad is aren't you?"

And now it's Jared's turn to frown, because what has that to do with all of this? Jensen's dad is a musician, who played in an obscure band when he met Jensen's Mom at some art meets music shindig eons ago. It was quite the scandal apparently in those days. Ballet world's golden girl running away with

some unsavoury musician, definitely not the classical kind. If he had to believe the school gossip it had also involved dumping Mister Morgan, but hey, it had all ended up with Jensen being here now, so Jared was all for that. And apparently the guy made it big later on, so nothing to be sad about there as well.

"What does that have to do with it?" he asks. "Your dad is a musician right, who nowadays plays in a band people have actually heard of, so they don't mind him that much anymore."

Jensen has stopped grinning at him by the end of that sentence and has gone right on to laughing right into Jared's face.

"What?" and if he sounds petulant, well maybe he is.

"Dude, how can you be so freaking uninformed while having lived at this place for months?"

"I'm not uninformed, what of what I just said is not right?"

"Nothing actually, but that doesn't change the fact that you're being hilarious without even knowing it."

And Jared has about had it with being laughed at by his best friend because - well he doesn't exactly know why, but it's not funny and he's going to go. He gets up and stalks out of the lounge towards his room, but Jensen is right behind him still laughing his head off. Jared storms into his room, Chad nowhere to be found luckily and turns in order to slam the door into Jensen's face, but unfortunately that's where his luck runs out because Jensen catches the door right in time and keeps pushing until he's inside still smirking.

Jared falls down on his bed, hides his face underneath his pillow and tells Jensen to go. "Go away man, you've had your fun, now go bother somebody else."

But Jensen just sits down next to him; hand on Jared's shoulder as if to turn him over, but he doesn't, he just sits there for a while, lets Jared get over himself underneath his pillow.

"You done being a pouting five year old?" he asks after a while.

"You done laughing at me?"

"I guess, although I wasn't laughing at you, I was laughing about you."

"It's the same," Jared mumbles into his pillow, not willing to concede his point.

"It's not, but let's not get lost in semantics, shall we. We've got more pressing business at hand. Like you accepting my awesome Christmas gift."

Jared turns around, staring unbelievably at him. "Did you miss the entire conversation we just had?"

"Actually all you said is you couldn't take it and then I asked about my dad and then we kind of lost track of the topic I think. That, and you stormed off."

"You were laughing at me!"

"Semantics, Jared!"

"Fine, fine, let's get back on track than, why do I care about who your dad is again?"

"Because my Dad is Alan Ackles, who you might know as the lead singer of *The Kings of Suburbia*, and he would be really disappointed if I let the two tickets he gave me for the opening concert of his new world tour go to waste because my best friend is a moron."

Oh....

Shit, the floor could swallow him right about now, bed and all.

But that obviously is not going to happen. And Jensen doesn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon either.

"I'm a moron," Jared finally concedes, not really knowing what else to say.

Jensen just flops down onto his bed, spreading out next to him, like it's nothing and grins. "Yeah, you sometimes really are."

"I didn't know."

"Doesn't matter, it's kind of nice. Means you're not just hanging out with me because of who my parents are."

"Who's a moron now?" he says giving Jensen a look that speaks volumes about who he thinks is full of shit.

"You would be surprised," Jensen answers quietly, seriously as well. And Jared kind of wants to get his hands on every single fraud who ever dared to pretend to be Jensen's friend, because that was just wrong.

"Yeah well, obviously, those are the real morons," and if the little grin that gets him, makes his heart beat a bit faster, there's nothing wrong with that.

"So, did you say you got two tickets just now?"

"Yeah."

"Please tell me Danneel is not squealing about her awesome Christmas present right now, because I know she's cool and all that, but she wouldn't be the person I would like to go with to the most awesome concert ever if I had a say in it."

Jensen snorts. "As if I would let you go to a big bad rock concert with only Danny by your side. You would be all alone and searching for the stage before you even set foot into the building, dude."

"I resent that you know."

"Well, you can resent me all you want; I'm coming with you to make sure you'll get back in one piece to tell the story."

And that, Jared thinks, is the most awesome plan he's ever heard. He wishes it were April 4th already.

April, however, is still far off and before they know it they are back to their usual routine.

Unfortunately for Jensen no routine keeps him safe from his nosy friends and although most of them don't seem to get the significance of exactly what he has been doing and why, there are those who know all too well. It shouldn't have surprised him to find Chris lounging in front of his room a few days later looking like it's the most normal thing.

"Chris," Jensen greets his friend, letting them both into the room. "What brings you here now that you've ascended to the hallowed halls of *American Ballet Theater* and are too good for your little friends at SAB?"

"No need to bitch Jenny, I was busy or I would have dropped by sooner."

Jensen just shakes his head, because Chris is probably right and anyway he's missed his friend. Chris had been two years ahead of him in SAB and they had shared a room in the early days before Chad had wormed his way into Jensen's life and later on into his room. As far as Jensen was concerned, Chris was his big brother just as much as Josh was and if Jensen ever had to admit to having an example, someone he looked up to, he would say Chris. Chris was a fantastic dancer, but everybody at *American Ballet Theater* was good, so in order to make his way up the ranks and out of the *corps* he was putting in some serious hours leaving him with little time to socialise with his old friends at SAB.

They flop down on Jensen's bed and for a while they just catch up on each other's life, on how Jensen made it through the *Nutcracker* and how Chris was preparing for *ABT's* upcoming *La Sylphide*. And for a second Jensen starts to believe that that's what Chris is here for. To catch up. He should have known better, but as it is Chris still manages to catch him unaware.

"So I've been talking to Danny and she's been telling me about you and this Jared kid. Anything you want to add to that?"

Jensen wants to be indignant, wants to kick him out and tell him to go care about his own freaking business. He wants to go and find Danneel and fucking kill her for getting Chris involved. But the fact that nobody knows, that he's got nobody but Danny to talk about this, is killing him, and so instead he just answers the question, making room for one more person.

"I think I'm kind of in love with him."

"Mmmm, I guessed as much when I heard you got him concert tickets. I'm telling you I'm feeling kind of neglected over here."

"Danny talks too fucking much," Jensen grumbles, but there's no real heat behind it. Chris is all right with this, he's not going to question him about it, he's just here so Jensen can talk and he'll listen. Chris is a good listener. He's also an ass.

"So, did you tell him?"

"Dude, no man - just no, I mean...."

"Well that's not a very productive way of getting what you want, now is it?"

"It's not that easy man."

"Why not, he into girls or what?"

"No! No, he's not the problem, I'm just...."

"Too chicken-shit to own up to it?"

"Jerk!"

"Bitch! Come on Jen, you can't spend the rest of your life pining after hot guys who would love to date you because you are too scared to admit it to them."

"Who says he wants to date me?" Because if there's one thing Jensen is not sure about, it's whether or not Jared likes him just as much as he does. Knowing would definitely make this a lot easier.

"Nobody really, although according to Danny he looks at you the same way he looks at Chocolate Fudge Brownie *Ben and Jerry's*, whatever that means."

Chocolate Fudge Brownie is Jared's favourite ice cream. It's Jensen's last resort whenever Jared starts to mope and complain about how much he sucks and nothing but a quick trip to *Ben and Jerry's* seems to be able to cheer him up. It always works like a charm.

"I just don't know how to tell him you know. I never had to actually tell somebody I liked them. With Danny it just happened!"

"And look at how that ended, huh. Just promise me you won't sit here the rest of the year making yourself miserable when you could be happy as a clam."

Jensen doesn't want to make any promises he's not sure he can keep.

"Come on Jenny, promise me."

"What if it all backfires, I really need to focus right now, and you should know how crucial the next few months are going to be for the rest of my life."

"Seriously, sometimes you are such a moron Ackles! You could probably bag a contract anywhere without even showing up, so stop making excuses and get the rest of your life on track. There's more than just dancing and you know it. And if this kid is it, you better not fuck it up because you're too afraid to own up to your own feelings. Because I'll be over to whack your sorry head. You might have heard that living for your art is all that, but I'm telling you, you don't want to stand on that stage five years from now, without anybody to share that amazing feeling with."

"Fine, I promise, but only if you people stay out of it and let me do this my way. And that includes Danny!"

"Fine with me, I'm sure Danny will be happy to hear so as well." Chris grins at him.

"And exactly why is it that you and Danny have been talking with each other anyways?" Jensen huffs. And apparently hits the jackpot, because the blush that starts to creep its way onto Chris' face says more than a thousand words would do right now.

"So has Jeff already announced the workshop pieces?"

"Dude, changing the subject is not going to do you any good now."

"Workshops, Jensen, the most important performance of your SAB career."

"Don't bother man, I'm so going to get it all out of Danneel anyways, she totally owes me."

February 2010 – New York

Jensen's sitting on the floor of studio 1 just like every other student at SAB. They are about to announce who is going to dance what in this year's end of the year SAB workshop performances and tension is filling the room. Although they are not an official part of the grading system, the part you manage to get during the workshops says a lot about your general standing within the system.

For the students in the Advanced section it's also the biggest opportunity they will get to sell themselves to the outside world. While most of them will perform for their parents and friends, everybody in the Advanced section will be doing their absolute best in order to impress the assembled scouts and artistic directors of dance companies around the world.

Therefore the part you get handed can make or break your career, it's that simple.

They've spent the better part of the last week being observed during classes and rehearsals. Jeff's been sitting in on a lot of classes as well, more than in previous years, which has been kind of disconcerting. They are all on edge and people have started to avoid each other because they are one step removed from killing the competition. Danny has been on the war path for several days now, bitching at all the other girls in her section even though it's clear that she's better than most of them combined. It's funny how something like this can bring out the worst of people.

Personally Jensen is unreasonably calm about the entire thing this year. He has found his groove, has been showing them some of his best dancing and really, the only person in the room who seems to be able to keep up with him is currently sitting next to him, trying to get rid of his nerves by keeping all of his six foot four self moving while sitting still on the floor. It's kind of funny how much the kid can move without actually moving.

"Jared, dude, could you sit still for a second," he tries, but Jared just shakes his head and keeps on wriggling his long legs.

"I don't know how you do it man."

"Years of experience!"

Jared huffs, "Sure, that and the knowledge that there's nobody in this room who comes even close to stealing a part out from under your nose. I on the other hand dropped Sandy onto the floor Wednesday, right in front of Mister Morgan. He's going to put me in the back and have me pretend I'm not there."

"Dude, you did not drop her onto the floor, you're past dropping, you let her slip but you caught her in time. And that was your first try at a lift that both of you had never done before and at least you gave it a try. From what I heard everybody else said thanks but no thanks, too afraid of messing up in front of the big boss. That will definitely count for something. Jeff likes people who try and take a risk. And anyways, since you are freakishly tall everybody will see you even if they put you in the back."

He's about to say more, but right then Jeff enters the studio and suddenly all noise dies out and everybody's eyes follow him towards the back wall where all the teachers have been sitting while they were waiting.

He stops in the middle of the studio, facing them all, while opening the folder he's holding and taking out a pile of papers.

"All right ladies and gentleman, we all know why we are here, end of the year workshop performances. The faculty has put together a fantastic collection of pieces I have to say, and I hope you will all contribute to your best ability in order to perform them the way they were meant to be performed. It's not going to be easy. We are not doing easy this year, but I'm sure you're all willing to put some hard work into this and make it work. We will now announce which piece will be performed by which class and who will be dancing the leads. Full cast lists will be put up on the back wall of the studio at the end of this meeting for you all to read." He waves around the pile of papers he just took out which must hold the cast lists.

He starts reading off the pieces one by one, starting with the lower sections. Jensen has seen or danced in a lot of them and he has to agree; they are definitely not going for easy this year. The girls in level three are doing a piece he's sure Danneel performed when she was in level four and if he remembers correctly she'd complained about it being hard even then. Once the lower sections are all hooked up, Jeff stops for a moment until the hushed silence falls back over the room.

"Before we continue, I might add that we have mixed things up a bit this year in the upper levels. We still have separate pieces for the Intermediate and Advanced sections, but we've also filled a few with a mix of people out of those sections. And, for the first time, some of you will be performing a world premiere during the workshops."

That obviously does the trick and suddenly everybody starts to talk and point and guess who will be doing what, filling up the studio with the wildest speculations.

A loud whistle brings them all back to attention.

"I'm sure you're all excited, but the faster you'll let me finish, the sooner you will know for sure people. So, Intermediates, you'll be performing *The Four Temperaments* by Balanchine as a group."

Jared's "Holy shit," went unheard with most other reactions to that announcement because Jeff just kept on talking.

"The group piece for the Advanced section will be *Bourree Fantasque*. Parts are on the list, check it out."

Jensen groans and Danneel is not far behind him a few seats towards the back. They are all dead. The opening on that piece alone will kill them all, leave alone the last two minutes of it. The only upside to it is that it will all be over and done with in 6 minutes.

"Besides the group pieces we'll be doing the following: *Paquita*, the pas de trios by Jensen, Danneel and Sandy, that's your 8 minutes of fame people, use them well. We're going to do the French version by *Pierre Lacotte*; it might be different from what you've rehearsed before so check it out. Up next are Steve, Katie and Genevieve, *Swan Lake*, Act 1, pas de trios. No moaning please, you want a job, you dance that piece people. Understudies for both pieces are on the list. The rest of you will do the *Mazurka* from *Coppelia*, and no, that's not old fashioned, it will only look that way if you make it look that way. It's up to you to make it look fresh and young and as if it is the best thing in the world to dance."

And yeah, Jensen thinks, sometimes being the best comes with a reward. He's sure he's not in that *Mazurka*.

"Last but not least, I've taken it upon me to choreograph something for two of you. It's a contemporary piece and Jensen and Jared will have the honour of presenting it to the public at its premiere. Buckle up gentleman, because it's not going to be an easy ride, but I'm sure you'll manage if you set your minds to it. You'll be informed about the details at some other time, we don't want to share the big secret with the rest of the world just yet. Rehearsal schedules will be up by tomorrow people, we'll try to fit you all in as best as we can, if we miss something and you have to be at two rehearsals at once please contact Miss Ferris, she'll try to fix it."

Jeff's clearly done and walks over to the wall to pin up his pile of lists, but Jensen is still stuck on the part where apparently he is dancing in this new piece. With Jared. Just the two of them, no girls, no tutu's, no froufrou; at least he's guessing there will be none of that because Jeff did say contemporary right?

He doesn't get much a chance to freak out some more, because Jared apparently has processed what has been said as well and wraps Jensen up in a Padahug. "This is so awesome," he prattles, "we are going to be so good, I'm telling you. Just you and me, no girls, no point shoes, no showing off the perfect female line. I bet it's full of awesome jumps and turns. Do you think we can go and talk to Mr. Morgan a bit about what it's going to be like? Or at least to find out on what music?"

And Jensen decides, that yeah maybe this is awesome, dancing a world premiere with Jared and maybe he doesn't need to freak out about it. All he has to do is dance, and he can do that, no problem!

Hours later after they have been congratulated and had a look at the cast list and got an email from Jeff about when they will be discussing the piece in more detail, he's laying on Jared's bed while Jared's on the phone with San Antonio. He's telling his mom all about the workshops and the parts he has to dance and how absolutely cool all of it is and he can't help but feel a little bit excited as well. He should probably call home as well, but unlike Mrs. Padalecki, he's sure his mom will see right through it all and get right to the point. He can practically hear her say it: 'that's an awful lot of parts to learn honey, don't you think Jeff is putting too much on your shoulders? What about your knee honey, don't you think it will be too much? You know what the doctors said about overdoing it!'

And maybe it is, but Jensen doesn't want to complain and he definitely doesn't want to pick on or the other. All he wants to do is dance and forget about the pressure and the expectations and the fact that his knee likes to play up every now and then. Most of all he wants to dance with Jared and he's not going to risk that by asking Jeff to cut him some slack. He might just do so by taking him off the new piece and that is so not going to happen.

An hour into their first rehearsal with Mr. Morgan Jared decides that he hates world premieres. The fucking problem with new pieces is that they are so freaking new. Unlike the classics, for which every single step has been annotated and performed exactly the same way for more than a century, new pieces are new and therefore subject to change. And apparently Jeff loves to change things.

Like the steps to the first four counts of eight they have been going through for the last 20 minutes. He's quite sure there's not a single step left from when they started. And most likely none of these that they are rehearsing now will make it into the final performance.

"Is he going to stick with any of this you think?" he whispers to Jensen when they make their way back to the other side of the room to do it once again but now with the new steps.

Jensen just shakes his head and counters with a rather desperate sounding, "Nope!"

Haydn's *Cello Concert no.1* in C major starts up again and there's no time for any more whispered complaints because they are too busy sprinting through the studio and Jared is glad that Miss Ferris usually is a dictator when it comes to practising beats, because this bloody piece of music will most likely be filled up with one long jumping sequence and the only thing that keeps Jared from dying right now, 32 counts into their 6 minute race against the clock, is the fact that he's used to it by now. If he's ever going to make it to the end of this concerto in one piece he deserves a gallon of ice cream.

Jensen, of course, looks as cool as a popsicle. Guy doesn't even break a sweat. And his hair sits around perfect as ever. It must defy gravity, Jared's sure of it. And that shirt - Jared is totally going to hide that shirt. Because he's not going to look at Jensen for another four months while he's wearing a skin tight green shirt that makes his eyes even greener than they are and brings out his freckles. It's bad enough he's got to look at Jensen in tights, because Mr. Morgan insists on decent practice attire. Jensen in sweatpants and one of his washed out *Kings of Suburbia* tour t-shirts would make all of this a lot easier.

An hour and a half later, they both sink down onto the floor of the studio. Jeff's long gone, the first little part of his new master piece finally penned down for good, Jared and Jensen more dead than alive.

"Crap, man. If he's going to keep up with this I'm not sure if I'll actually make to opening night," Jared moans, stripping off his shirt and sinking back into the wall that feels nice and cool against his skin. "And to make it all worse I have *Temperaments* rehearsal in about 5 minutes all the way in studio 6. They could just make my life a bit easier by scheduling these things in neighbouring studios. I'm telling you they do this on purpose."

Jensen just grunts in reply, still trying to catch his breath. Jeff was seriously trying to kill them. "I'm right there with you, I've got *Paquita* in studio 8. And the elevator broke, so I'll have to climb all those fucking stairs." He starts to get up, stretches his hand out to pull Jared up as well, but when he does so he overbalances and ends up on the floor himself, six feet of shirtless Padalecki pressed against his chest. And that really shouldn't feel so good because he's kind of getting squashed and they are both beyond sweaty and it doesn't make it any easier to breathe. But somehow he still has the time to think all that without either of them making an attempt to move, which means Jared's not all that opposed to just lying there on top of him either.

Jensen grins up at Jared, "Not that I really care Sasquatch, but do you mind? You're getting kind of heavy."

Jared just shakes his head and rolls over onto the floor, stretching out his ridiculously long limbs while plastering himself to Jensen's side. It's kind of nice. It might also slightly cross the line of just being friends. But who cares? They both end up being late for their next rehearsal.

Part Four

March 2010 – New York

Half way through March, life at SAB has morphed into a very predictable pattern of classes and rehearsals from morning to evening and then some. Jared suddenly has a very good view on how his life will look like if he decides this is what he'll do for the rest of his existence, or you know, until he retires at the ripe old age of 35. It's long hours full of physical activity that drive him to the brink of utter exhaustion and turn his body into six plus feet of hurting muscles, no matter how conditioned they all are to do this.

He doesn't really have something to compare it with, but if he listens to the people around him, the general consensus is that they are being worked hard, harder than ever before if he has to believe Sandy. Chad has taken to moaning about it constantly. Jared has absolutely zero tolerance for any of it. Because Chad, Chad has it ridiculously easy. He's got *Temperaments* and the *Mazurka* and two smaller parts as an understudy. Compared to Jared's schedule it's a piece of cake. And he's nowhere near being involved in the ' *World Premiere of Doom*', Jensen's words not Jared's.

Doesn't make them any less true though. All the excitement of dancing something new, something that has never shown before and has been choreographed just for them is long gone after hours and hours of being chased across the length of a studio while being yelled at by the biggest perfectionist in the universe.

The thing is, it's not a student piece, not by far. It's a piece of dance that could and should be danced by the best dancers on this planet. Jared's thinking *Mazarkov* and *Moreinho* would do an excellent job with it, combining their strength and elegance with perfect technique and musicality and a catlike grace. Jensen leans more towards *Lenox* and *O'Hare* himself, keeps saying that the contrast between the big tall black principal dancer of *Dallas Modern Ballet Company* and the pale, tiny blond principal dancer of the *British Royal Ballet* would be the final touch of perfection to the piece.

Unfortunately for them, for now this is a Jensen and Jared show. And Jensen and Jared are slowly but surely reaching the end of their straws. Sure, on a good day Jared might actually come close to landing a quadruple *tour en air*, but that's a good day, when he's slept 8 hours and all he has done that day is a technique class to warm up his aching body. At the moment however he's running on about four hours of sleep and another four hours of uninterrupted dancing and landing, which means the stupid jump is not going to happen. This, according to Jeff, is absolutely unacceptable. The fact that Jensen, who lands his quadruples with his eyes closed after rolling out of bed on any normal day, has been landing triples for the last half an hour isn't making things any better.

"Damn it Jensen, at least give the kid something to live up to. And Jared, put some power into it, this is not second grade, this is the big league, which means big jumps. Deep down in *plié*, lift, turn, land, it's not that hard, so do it!"

They start again, somewhere half way through the part, the same bars of music they've been working on for the last hour, perfecting everything from hand movements to the exact placement of their nose at any given time. It's a series of jumps followed by a bit of a languid moving filler sequence followed by more jumps.

They start at opposite ends of the stage that has been taped down for them onto the studio floor with yellow duck tape and they circle around each other during the filler just to end up back to back in the centre after they land that stupid quadruple. The piece has been marked out on the floor, with little yellow

crosses scattered all around it, little reminders for the both of them to hit their marks at certain points throughout the piece.

Right now that means he has to push at every jump, at every turn in order to travel far enough to cross the enormous distance of the stage and make it to his little mark in time. When they cross each other he can hear Jensen's breath coming out short and hard, but then they are out of reach again and the only thing left to hear is his own laboured breathing and the slap of his feet whenever he lands a jump.

He turns and launches into the languid interlude, a series of treacherously simple looking steps, but really nothing in this piece is simple. It requires utter control of every moving body part and needs to be induced with a feeling of serenity, which is rather hard to do if all you really feel is pain and exhaustion and the great need to die right there and then.

Too soon they are through the interlude and back to the jumps again, the required rapid footwork taking over every single functioning brain cell he has left. He launches into the *plié* for the quadruple, puts in every last ounce of strength, because maybe, if they do this right, Jeff will let them finally go. He spins, once, twice, three times and forces his body to do just one more rotation in the available period of time on the way down. He lands it and it might not have been a picture book landing, but he's standing and a quick glance down tells him he just about hit his mark. The music stops and he turns around, Jen still rooted into fifth position on his spot.

"There you go," is all Jeff has to say before he turns to gather his stuff. "Get some sleep boys, I want you in here tomorrow by four, we'll take it from here and no slacking please, I know you can do this, I wouldn't have choreographed it this way if you couldn't."

They wait until he's out of the door before they crash hard onto the floor, too tired to even make it back to a wall to rest against.

"I hate him," Jared moans while he starts to stretch out his legs, because his body will kill him tomorrow if he doesn't cool down decently now. "He's a freakin' masochist, he enjoys seeing us in pain, I'm sure of it."

There's no response, which isn't like Jensen, who usually has a sarcastic remark ready to go. He turns around and what he sees confirms that something is wrong. Jensen is lying on his side, facing the other way, staring of into empty space. More worrying however is the fact that he's massaging his knee, the one that he had surgery on if Jared got his facts straight.

Jared gets up and around him, sinks down crossed legged right in Jensen's line of sight.

"Hey, are you all right?"

Jensen nods, but that's all he gets and that's no good.

He lies down, stretches out along side of him, like they've been doing more and more these last few weeks. But Jensen doesn't unfold, keeps rubbing circles into his knee which he has pulled up, foot resting onto his other leg. Jared puts his hand onto Jensen's, who keeps rubbing.

"Jen? Come on man, talk to me. Does it hurt? Do you want me to go and get Doc Gamble? She can have a look at it, see what you need."

"It's fine," Jensen says after a while, "all it needs is a bit of rest and it will be fine. I'm just exhausted and I can't seem to find a moment to sit down and unwind and Jeff keeps yelling at me and...."

"Dude, Jeff yells at both of us, he likes to yell, I'm telling you, it's not personal, he just needs to yell, it's probably part of his creative process." That gets him a tiny, but exhausted smile.

"You think?"

"I know, man! Now let's get you up and into a stretch, because I'm not going to listen to your moaning tomorrow about how everything hurts because you were too lazy to cool down and stretch out those sore muscles. I room with Chad, I've got enough moaning for a life time."

And even though Jensen still seems to be out of it, he does unfold out of his crouch and starts to stretch, so that's a little victory at least.

"Maybe we can tone down on the extra practice a bit," Jared adds after they work side by side quietly. "That way you can get some more rest, I'm sure Sandy and I can get most of it done by ourselves, and Danneel can always help us out if we can't. You don't have to be there every time you know."

"But I don't mind," Jensen starts, but Jared's not having any of it. If there's one person who has even more on their plate right now than him, it's Jensen and Jensen has been spending an awful lot of his free time in the evening helping the rest of them practice.

"I know you don't mind, but you are running yourself into the ground man. You need to turn it down a notch, let your body get some rest. I mean, we are all really grateful that you help us out whenever we need it, but every now and then you have to think about yourself instead of us and do what's best for you, OK?"

It comes out in a flurry of words, and it might have sounded a bit more strict and stern than he meant it to be, but Jensen just gives him a look before he smirks, "Sure Mom, whatever you say!"

And with that, things are back to normal, which means Jared whacks him, because he's not just like his Momma, thank you very much, and he has definitely no motherly feeling for Jensen. And he's quite sure Jensen has different kinds of feeling for him as well, although he hasn't said so out loud. He's been making it quite clear though these last few weeks, lots of little things that add up to a whole lot more, and even though it scares the crap out of Jared to know that maybe Jensen likes him just as much as he likes him back, it also makes all of this a bit more bearable. No matter how hard they have to work, no matter how much all of it hurts, he gets to spend time with the person he loves best in this world while doing it, which makes up for a lot.

It's nine o'clock on a Tuesday night and Jensen is laying on his bed in his empty room, staring at his ceiling. Jared has effectively banned him from any non-scheduled rehearsals until further notice and to Jensen's chagrin he made sure the girls backed him up on it. Whenever he shows his face in a studio he gets shooed away by his class mates and their friends alike. It's annoying, but at the same time, it makes him feel like at least somebody cares. He's not sure that could be said of any of the staff right now.

He could go and find himself a studio to practice on his own for a while, plenty of stuff that needed work, but he can't really bring himself to get up. Jared is right; his body definitely needs some fucking rest. Even now, just lying here, his knee throbs in a steady painful rhythm, even though he iced it down right after they finished rehearsal. It's not even close to how painful it was right before the operation two years ago, but the fact that it starts to hurt again has him worried. So yeah, rest is not such a bad idea. It just leaves him with too much time to think about things that make him worry.

There's the knee, but there's a lot of other things as well. The fact that he doesn't seem to live up to Jeff's expectations, no matter how hard he pushes himself during rehearsals, the fact that several companies around the world have contacted him to come and audition after graduation, while *NYCB* expects him to sign with them no matter what. He hasn't called home for ages because his Mom will ask him about his plans and he doesn't know what to tell her. She'll tell him to do what he wants, what will make him happy, but she seems to have forgotten that is not exactly how things work in the world of ballet. What Jensen wants right now is dig a hole and curl up inside of it to hide from the rest of the world. Or in his less dramatic moments, have somebody else make all those important decisions for him.

Than of course there is the entire Jared situation. He has been working on getting up the nerve to just come out and tell him, but it's not going the way he planned. Turns out telling the person you have a crush

on that you like them is a lot harder than it seems. Instead he tries to make it obvious in a lot of other ways that he wouldn't be opposed to something more, something different. There's been a lot of touching going on these last few weeks, a lot of talking as well and even though he's not sure whether Jared gets what it means, he doesn't seem to mind it either.

All they need is to go that one little step further, go that little bit extra to cross over from being really good friends to being something more. Danneel and Chris have taken to making up the most outrageous and unbelievable scenarios on how to seduce Jared, but Jensen has decided he will wait until the right moment presents itself. Or until Jared makes the first move. Jared who, as far as Jensen knows, had at least one Texan ex-boyfriend he used to kiss and make out with, so he should know how to do this.

All the other stuff he'll worry about after they get there. Right now, he's going to sneak into the kitchen on their floor and get another ice pack for his knee, run through some of his PT exercises from after the surgery and get some sleep. That way at least something good will come out of this.

April 2010 – Madison Square Garden – New York

Murdering schedule or not, April comes along and on Friday the 4th, Jared and Jensen have the night off early so they can make their way to the concert. Sure, there's a curfew and Mr. Morgan had frowned long and hard at them when they begged off of even more rehearsal, but in the end it was a Friday night and they were free to do whatever they wanted as long as they had parental permission and were back in time.

They start their night off early, going into the city to have some food and hang out before they make their way to the arena. By the time they arrive, masses of people are making their way into the arena, pouring onto the midfield and into the stands. Jared, who has never been at an event this big feels kind of overwhelmed, but Jensen threads his way through the crowd with an ease that speaks volumes about how often he has done this. He leads them to a roped off area near the entrance and this is where Jared gets to reap the full benefit of his all access VIP pass for the first time. The rope opens for them and they are lead through a door and suddenly there are less people and a lot more space. They follow one of the attendants through the innards of the stadium until they reach another door. With an 'enjoy the show,' he pulls open the door for them and they are met by a wave of sound that makes Jared freeze for a second. Jensen just pushes him forward through the door and into the VIP area in front of the massive stage.

"Christ," he exclaims, because there are thousands of people standing behind them, around them, all of them talking and cheering and dancing around on the tunes of one of the opening acts. Jensen just grabs his hand and starts weaving them through the crowd that occupies the VIP area, right towards the front and middle. Apparently they won't settle for anything less than the best spots available.

One opening act follows the next and even though *Kings of Suburbia* still has to make it onto the stage, Jared is already having the time of his life, jumping and bouncing around on the tunes of some girl punk rock band that is five kinds of awesome.

"You ever heard of them before?" he yells at Jensen, because really any other kind of communication will get lost in the combined noise of the crowd and the 5 screaming guitars on stage.

"I might have met them over Christmas," Jensen yells back, grinning at him.

Jared just shakes his head at that. "You've got their music somewhere in your mammoth *iTunes* collection so I can steal it tomorrow?"

Jensen just nods his head before he starts jumping again, up and down on the beat of the guitars, nodding his head in time with the music.

They make another quick run to the bar to stock up on drinks and snacks when they are setting up stage for the main act and while they are at it, sneak a few more rows up to the front. All the lights shut down at a certain point and a strange kind of silence starts to settle over the enormous crowd of people. Since this

is the opening show of this tour, nobody has seen the set pieces yet; nobody knows what is going to happen next.

"You know what is going to happen now?" Jared asks, toning down the volume a bit, not wanting to draw any attention to the fact that Jensen Ackles is in the crowd. This is his night out with Jensen; he's not planning on sharing.

"No, new shows are usually big secrets around my place. We usually spend hours grilling Dad and the guys to find out what they have planned, but they never talk. They are mean like that. Dad always says that the fact that we get to hear all the new music first should be more than enough for us."

And Jared can't help but agree. The new album hasn't been out all that long, maybe a month, a month and a half tops, but he got a copy of Jensen's playlist in January, with all of the new songs included. He knows them word for word, and somehow song by song they've found their way into his life. It's the songs he has lived by the last few months, songs that have accompanied him through hours of rehearsals, schoolwork, spare time, hours of getting closer and closer to Jensen as well. It makes them extra special and to be here now to hear them live for the first time ever, Jensen by his side, the roaring crowd behind him, he thinks he'll never forget this moment, no matter what happens next.

And then, out of the pitch black, the intro of *Kings and Queens* starts up, lights start flashing on, the crowd roaring along on the opening *ohohohoho*'s and they are off. Half an hour later, the intro to *Use Somebody* echoes through the arena and somehow, he's not sure why or when, Jensen's hand found its way into Jared's, and even though he might have missed the exact moment it got there, he makes sure not to let go of it. He holds on tight while thousands of people bellow '*you know I could use somebody, somebody like you!*'"

When the speed starts to slow down and the band starts up *Closer* he decides to hell with waiting and not being sure. Instead he pulls Jensen close to him, his back against Jared's chest while they sway on the languid beat of the song. He puts their clasped hands on Jensen's hip, slipping a finger in one of the belt loops to hold on better. Any doubts about what Jensen might think of this new arrangement disappear the moment Jensen practically grinds into Jared when *Crawl* starts up. And yeah, maybe they are both too chicken-shit to give whatever it is they are doing a name, but one thing he's sure of; they fit awfully well together dancing like this.

And like all good things, it all seems to be over far too fast. They hop together through *Mr. Brightside* and *Somebody Told Me*, get a bit of a breather and some drinks at the bar during *Lonely Girl* and are right back on their spot for the big finale. When *Uprising* echoes through the arena, sung by the fans, word for word, as loud and clear as if it were a recording, goose bumps find their way onto Jared's arms which are slung around Jensen once more. They close with *Be Somebody*, the crowd jumping up and down on the upbeat song like their lives depend on it. When the lights turn down once more, there's no silence however. The stadium fills with a call for more that grows stronger and stronger and lasts a good 20 minutes, when the band makes its way back onto the stage.

Instead of starting with the encore however, Jensen's Dad gets to the mike to have a chat with them all. It's only now, with the lights on full power, that Jared notices how much they look alike, Jensen and his Dad. It might be the fact that by now they are both soaked in sweat, hair pushed back without thought, t-shirts clinging in all the right places, or the fact that the lights are still on and he can see them both clearly, but they have the same eyes, big and green with lashes any girl would kill for. Jensen's Dad has little laugh lines around his, that crinkle whenever he laughs at something the audience yells across the arena. The same mouth as well, especially when they smile. Nice lips, and yeah, maybe he should stop comparing and pay attention to what is going on.

"All right ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, we are going to play you some more songs. I'm sure you know most of them, but we'll start off with something completely new, never heard before, by anyone. It's

dedicated to my youngest son, who's here today and this is what one could call a very belated birthday present. He's 17 for a few more months though, so I'm sure we'll call it even. Ladies and gentleman, 17."

Jensen goes completely still in Jared's arms for a moment when they start up the song, but by the time they've reached the chorus he's grinning one of his big grins, the ones that are saved for special occasions and they are both back to swaying along on the music.

Four songs later, the lights turn back on for good and people start to find their way out of the arena. When Jared starts towards the door they came in through though, Jensen latches onto his wrist once more, and starts pulling him into the other direction.

"Jen, I think the door is over there," Jared tries, but either the crowd is still too loud or Jensen is ignoring him, so in the end he just follows. They end up on the other side of the VIP area which has an extra roped off area, full of big security guys in suits that are talking into their little earphones. This is obviously the entrance to the backstage area and it's clearly not somewhere mere mortals can go.

The thing is; he keeps forgetting Jen's not just a mere mortal.

"Hey Cliff," Jensen yells once he reaches the roped off back stage area entrance, waving at his Dad's head of security. Cliff just grins and starts making his way towards them.

"Well, well, if it isn't Jensen Ackles in the flesh. Long time no see kid! You enjoyed the show?"

"Yeah man, it was awesome. And I got a song so I can't really complain now can I?"

"Nope, that's right. You guys wanna get in and say hello to your Daddy? "

"That was kind of the plan."

"Well, jump the rope both of you so I can escort you to the door."

Jensen ducks and slides underneath the rope, never letting go of Jared, who apparently decided to grow roots on the other side.

"Come on Jared, just a quick in and out, we'll be back plenty in time, promise."

"Dude, I'm so not worried about being home in time right now. I'm about to step into the backstage area of a rock concert. Chances are I'll be meeting THE Alan Ackles in about five minutes. I need to think about what to say to the man."

Jensen just grins at him. "Try, 'Hi I'm Jared, I'm a friend of Jensen's at SAB', it usually does the trick."

Jared rolls his eyes right back at him but finally makes his way to Jensen's side of the rope.

Cliff walks them over to the heavy guarded door, clearing them on their way over. By the time they get there the door is keyed open for them. One step in and it's silent again, or at least a lot less noisy than it was outside in the arena. In here it's all back ground bustle, mechanics and roadies walking around, busy breaking down the stage and bringing in all the equipment.

Jensen makes his way through the hallways, he's been here before, knows where to go.

One more corner and they are on the home stretch, artist lounge and dressing rooms stretching out in front of them. Jared's been quiet so far, is probably still figuring out what to say, but Jensen's not worried. He'll be fine, it's how Jared is.

He walks past the lounge, waves at Rod and Barry who are lying on two of the couches, catching their breath after more than two hours of playing. He walks down the hallway, last dressing room to the right, because musicians might not be as superstitious as dancers, but continuity sure as hell helps even them. He knocks, more out of habit than necessity before walking in long before the 'come on in' makes it out of his Dad's mouth.

It's only then that he lets go of Jared's wrist, sure of the fact that he's there right behind him and walks on right into his Dad's waiting arms.

"Hey Jenny-Bean, missed you too," his Dad quips, hugging him hard to his chest.

And it's stupid he knows, because they've seen each other during Christmas break, but sometimes, even after years of living apart from his family, Jensen sometimes misses them so much it hurts. So these little get-togethers in between breaks are important. They are his touchstones to the world outside of SAB and dancing, and especially his dad always seems to be able to put it all back into perspective. He could do with some of that right now.

"So," his dad breaks the moment, but not their hug, "who'd you bring along?"

And shit, for a moment right there, he forgot all about Jared. He turns around, ready to apologise, but Jared is his big grinning self, making his way across the room, sticking out his hand. "Jared Padalecki sir, pleased to meet you. We go to school together at SAB."

"The pleasure is all mine Jared. I hope you enjoyed the show."

"Oh absolutely, it was so amazing, I'm still speechless, really."

Having said that he just keeps talking about what he liked and what was awesome and how he's going to practise this or that riff on his guitar. Speechless my ass, Jensen thinks, but he doesn't say anything about it, because his dad joins in on the conversation and before he knows it all three of them are discussing the set list and what not and it's like Jared belongs there right beside him.

"So, are you guys hungry?" his dad asks after a while. "Because I sure could put away one of *Harvelle's* cheeseburger deluxe menus and I wouldn't mind feeding the two of you."

"Sure," Jensen starts to answer, but it's Jared who finishes for him, "We've got a curfew sir and we are kind a late already."

Stupid childish curfew, he's almost 18, he can be out after 12. It's not like they are running around on their own in one of the crappier parts of town. They are four subway stops away for God's sake.

Luckily his dad seems to share his opinion for once.

"I'll tell you what. I'm going to make some calls, see if I can keep you boys for a bit longer."

And with that, he's on his phone, probably calling Mister Beaver as well as Jeff out of their beds, but in the end he gets the all clear and they are allowed to stay out, the entrance security code scribbled down on a coaster. Half an hour later they walk over to *Harvelle's*, the hole in a wall diner a few blocks from the *Garden*, one of New York's better-kept secrets. The band has joined them and Jared is finally giving in to his inner fan girl, getting everybody to sign his KOS shirt with a Sharpie he got who knows where.

Once the cheeseburgers arrive, the talk slowly but surely shifts into the direction of what they've been up to, so there's no way he can avoid talking about school.

Well, to be true, it's not that bad and Jared does most of the talking anyways, telling them stories about how it sucks to be the new guy who drops girls, Chad's newly acquired faux-hawk, Danneel's yellow fluorescent leotard, the torture they call workshop preparation and of course the '*World Premiere of Doom*'. Jensen just grunts affirmatively every now and then, chews his cheeseburger and sips his coke.

Jared's sitting next to him and if the hand he's not waving around to go along with his stories finds its way onto Jensen's knee more often than not, nobody seems to notice.

It's three by the time they roll out of a town car in front of *Rose Building* and Dad tells the driver to go and get some sleep, he'll walk his way back to the *Plaza*.

He makes sure they get the door open without setting the alarm of before he shakes Jared's hand and pulls Jensen in for one last hug. They've been avoiding the big elephant in the room the entire night, but Jensen knows he's not going to get off that easy.

"Alright kiddo, you know, I'm not going to tell you what or what not to do, but call your Mom OK? Because she's about to go crazy and you know how she gets. If she can't get you on the phone she starts to call other people. People like me and your brother. Your brother, who kindly informed me to tell you, he'll bloody kill you if she calls him once more to ask whether or not you called him while he's in the middle of something far more important, whatever that might be."

Jensen just nods into his dad's shoulder, his call home is long overdue and if he's going to wait any longer Mom's very likely going to get on a plane and make that a face to face talk. No good would come from that. At least on the phone he can elude and play it all down a notch. And now that he has been to the show he has more than enough to talk about without delving too deep.

"And I know I'm not an expert here, but from where I'm standing you're looking tired and skinny and if I got the gist from what Jared's been telling you've got an awful lot of stuff on your plate right now, so I want you to promise me to take care of yourself. And if you need to talk about anything at all you can call me any time, alright? And I mean anything Jen, anything at all. Just pick up the phone."

"OK."

"Good, now get your ass inside and into bed, so Jeff won't have to get a fit tomorrow morning when you roll out of bed more dead than alive." He gets one more hug, a peck on his forehead and then they let go. Jensen walks inside, closing the door behind him, while his dad walks off towards the *Plaza*. He'll be on a plane to Europe in about 12 hours, leaving Jensen with nothing but a song and his undecided future to worry about.

That night, the concert still ringing in his ears, after a night of good music, hand holding and the best burgers he's had this side of Texas, Jared decides he's done with going slow. Obviously Jensen likes him. It's equally obvious he has no clue what to do about it, or they would have spent at least part of the night doing a bit more than just dancing. Which, if he thinks about it is not more than normal. As far as he knows, and to be clear on this, he's made damn sure to know, Jensen has only ever dated Danneel and that they decided to call it quits one day, no hard feelings on either side. As to why, nobody really knows and that says a lot in a gossip mill like SAB. Whatever it was they kept it between the both of them.

So maybe Danneel knows but doesn't care, and obviously Jensen knows, but he doesn't know what to do now, so that leaves the technicalities of how this is going down up to Jared. And Jared is done going slow. Now he's sure guerilla tactics would do more harm than good, so he'll just pick the middle way. Give Jensen some more time to adjust but press his point nevertheless. And there's totally going to be making out in the near future, because he's not going to make it much longer if it's just going to be him and his hand and his imagination of what could be.

He starts off operation 'Kiss Jensen' right that Saturday. First of course he has to rehearse for the '*World Premiere of Doom*', but to everybody's great surprise things go well for a change. Mr. Morgan doesn't change any of the steps, Jensen and Jared seem to get the hang of most of it and with more than two months to go until T minus zero, that apparently is deemed to be enough for now. Maybe they should just go out, and stay up half the night more often.

They are done in time for lunch, which they spent by recounting every single thing they did last night, minus the hand holding and the sticking together most of the night. After lunch, Jensen is off to the *Swan Lake* pas de trois rehearsal where he is Steve's understudy giving Jared all the time in the world to corner Danneel. He needs some answers fast and maybe some help and she's really the only person who will do for both.

Knocking on the door, he lets himself into the room. And he thanks the Gods, because for once, Sandy is not there, which will save him one more lie to get rid of her. Danneel is lying stretched out on her bed, still wearing her training gear, a sweater pulled on over the leotard to keep warm. She looks up from the magazine she's been leafing through when he enters.

"Jared," she smiles up at him, "what can I do for you?"

"Uhm," he starts off, suddenly not that sure anymore about any of this. How did he forget about the fact that sometimes this girl could be down right scary? "I just wanted to ask you about something, you know. But you don't have to answer if you don't want to." He's kind of stammering and damn it, he's not going to chicken out now.

"I just wanted to know why you and Jensen broke up is all?"

All he gets as an answer is a raised eyebrow, like she's waiting for more. Well she can wait as long as she wants; he's not going to throw it all out there. Not before she answers at least that one simple question. And he's willing to wait for the answer. He sits down on Sandy's bed and just stares right back at her. And he's never ever lost a staring contest, thank you very much, he's not going to start today!

And for sure, after a while the lady cracks.

"I don't think that's any of your concern Jared."

Not the answer he wants, but definitely the one he expected to get. He comes prepared.

"Actually, I think it might be. You see if it is because of what I think it is it definitely concerns me."

"Well maybe it wasn't about whatever you think it was about!"

And yeah, this is not getting him anywhere, not with her getting all defensive and not giving him an inch.

"Okay, you know what, fine! I'm going to say it if that makes you any happier Danneel, OK? I like him. I like him an awful lot. And I'm sure he likes me too, but it would be really great if I would know for sure, so I won't make a complete and utter fool out of myself in front of my best friend when I start hitting on him. There it is, are you happy now?"

And yeah, maybe half of the hallway heard that, cause he might have been a bit loud, but he's sure most of them are of to rehearsal or out doing something useful with their free time, so he's not going to worry about that now.

Also, Danneel's grinning at him like he's a loon.

"It's not funny you know!"

"I'm sorry," she counters shaking her head, "It's just that you look so damn cute when you get all hot and bothered. Like a big bouncy puppy."

He might hit something any second now. But then he thinks about the last time he had wanted to hit something and about how Jensen took him out and away from it all to make him feel better, because he doesn't like it when Jared gets all mad. He'll definitely be mad if he hits something in front of Danneel. So he ropes himself together.

"Like I said before, it's not funny Danneel, I'm being serious here and you are so not helping."

"And like I said Jared," she cuts in, "I'm sorry and I'm helping. Well I want to help and I think I can help, but I had to be sure as well you know. Because while he might not be my boyfriend anymore he's still my best friend in the world, which means I have to look out for him just as much as he looks out for me. You get that right?"

"Yeah," he grudgingly admits, "that's fine with me. So, are you going to answer the question now?"

"Hold your horses okay? I'm going to tell you. I'm just not sure exactly how. It's not like we ever discussed it in as many words as we will probably do now. We've been friends for a really long time as you know and then after a while we decided that maybe we should be a bit more than just friends. And we tried and for a while it was really nice, he's a good kisser and all that, but to make a long story short, we never made it past second base, well maybe third if you count that one time, but yeah, let's stick to second base. And it wasn't because of lack of trying if you get what I mean. So in the end I sat him down and we talked about it and apparently there's nothing wrong with the goods, which means there must have been something wrong with me."

Jared frowns at that, because really, gay or no gay even he can see that Danneel is definitely hot babe material.

"Don't give me that face Padalecki. There's absolutely nothing wrong with me besides the fact that I am a girl and that's apparently not exactly what gets Jensen going. So I broke up with him. Told him to get his head straight and own up to his feelings. But of course in true Jensen fashion he first denied, then simply decided to forget about it."

"He forgot about it?" Because Jared can't imagine how you can forget about something that's such an integral part of yourself.

"Sure, he's a champ in just forgetting. He would make a good ostrich you know. Whenever something bothers him or gets too much or requires attention he doesn't want to pay to it he sticks his head in the sand and waits for it to magically disappear. Which never happens of course, but that's what he does. He did it when his knee was hurting and he didn't say anything until it was far too late, he did it after we broke up, he's doing it right now for God's sake. He doesn't know what to do after graduation, but instead of sitting down and making up his own mind he just goes along with what everybody else tells him to do. He'd rather be a miserable soloist at *NYCB* than a happy dancer anywhere else because it would take disappointing some of his teachers and trainers along the way."

Jared's kind of blown away after that, because he and Jensen spend a lot of time together and they've never really talked about any of that. Would he really rather sign with *NYCB* to please Mr. Morgan and a bunch of other people who got him there? For sure, they've spent a lot of time and effort in training him, but in the end it's Jensen who brings in the talent and the determination and the hours of work that are required to get to the top. And he should be able to dance wherever he wants to, not wherever they like him to.

"Okay, I might get what you are talking about, but still, it's not like he can just flip the switch on being gay, it's not how it works, I mean--"

"Of course not, but the way we left things, we broke up and we finished out the year and there was nobody he felt particularly attracted to, so it wasn't a problem. He went back to Texas for the summer, saw the family, went to church, learned about family values and how to live your life without sin and by the time he came back he was in complete and utter denial. Nothing ever happened. We did never have that conversation. The thing is it would have worked just fine as well. Like I said, he's very good at this. He just didn't account for one tiny little thing. It totally screwed up his entire plan really."

"What happened? What little thing?"

She gives him that look again. The one that clearly says 'dude maybe you should use your brain cells every now and then'.

"Dude, did I say little?" And yeah the sarcasm is dripping off of it, but he'll take whatever he can get right now. "Because what I meant was a giant, Sasquatch sized idiot, that waltzed his way into SAB and right into his heart. Sound familiar?"

Okay....okay! He can live with that; he can definitely positively live with that. He grins up at her, falling backwards on to Sandy's bed, letting out a howl.

"Super!"

"Yeah, what are you going to do about it though?"

"Hey, I've been doing a lot in case you haven't noticed, it's just he's not giving me a lot to go on here."

"Ostrich!"

"Hey, stop comparing him to some ugly bird! And it's not like he's not trying, he's just all over the place and I never know if it'll stick or if he'll be back to just being friendly the next day. And I don't wanna do something that will freak him out because then we'll be back to zero."

"Did you talk to him?"

"What? You want me to just go up to him and ask?"

Women, they obviously had no clue.

"Hey, worked just fine for me, so I'm sticking with it. If you know a better way, go for it."

"I hate you."

"Nope, you really don't because Jen loves me and he wouldn't like you as much as he does if you really truly hated me. He's great like that."

"Can't you just ask him for me?"

"What is this, 6th grade? I've got better things to do than go around and ask people if they like you."

"Not whether he likes me, whether he would mind me taking it up a notch from liking each other. I thought we established the like was mutual ages ago."

"No!"

"Why not? You obviously discussed the entire matter in length before"

"Jared," and yeah, she would be great imitating his mom at her best lecture moments, "I'm not going to ask him, because it's not going to get you anywhere closer to actually doing it than you are now. He wants to, you want to, just go and fucking do it!"

"God woman, you're so not helping."

"I know, but that's the thing, I can't. I can't make this any easier for you, you'll have to do it yourself or sit back and wait until Jen is done with whatever it is he's doing and mans up himself. Which, I might say, could take him a while."

"I know, it's just-"

"Don't go sit around waiting for the perfect moment, all right? There is no such thing. Just make sure that whenever you do it, whatever you do, that he's the one who started it. You said he's trying, so wait for whatever it is he does whenever he's trying and take it from there. At least that way he'll be in the right mindset to take that next step. Forcing it on him while he's being all 'I don't know what you are talking about' won't do you any good."

And that might not exactly be the piece of advice he came for, but it will have to do. It's sound advice.

Part Five

May 2010 – New York

It's the first week of May, 8 weeks to go until the workshops and their premiere, and things have gone from bad to worse. Or at least that's how it feels to Jensen. All the extra rest and icepacks for his knee are not bringing the desired result. It still hurts like hell after a few hours of intensive rehearsal and it's screwing up his focus and his dancing. To make things worse Jeff is back to changing things after a few weeks of sudden consistency. And new usually means harder and time is running away with them. At least most of the other pieces are going decently as long as he isn't more dead than alive from rehearsing with Jeff before he has to run through them.

He has called his Mom, skirted around the truth enough to not get her even more worried or, God forbid, on a plane out to New York. As far as she knows he's just very busy, maybe a bit stressed but he's always stressed the closer a performance comes and yes he's eating. Which he's not, not really, but there are enough people keeping an eye on him right now to make sure he eats three meals a day, even though Danneel makes it clear frequently that protein shakes are not meal substitutes and that 'just a salad' will not get him through the day. He doesn't care, he has zero appetite and at least this way he doesn't have to drag all those extra pounds up into the air every time he has to jump.

And of course there is the Jared situation. He just can't comprehend how he got this deep into it, but he is and ever since the concert he can't seem to put any of it back into the box he's been keeping it for most of the year. And truth be told, he really doesn't want to. That night had been great. Great because they'd danced together and Jared had just held him like it was the most normal thing in the world to stand there together at a rock concert, plastered all over each other for the world to see. It had felt nice, leaning into Jared's chest, his hands resting on Jensen's hips and he would be lying if he hadn't be hoping for something more.

Of course nothing more had happened, because he had dragged Jared off to meet his Dad and then they had gone home and somehow the moment had passed and they were back to tiptoeing around each other on a daily basis. And it was driving him crazy. He wants this, wants Jared like he never wanted something before. Definitely wants him a whole lot more than he ever wanted Danneel. So why couldn't he just go and take it, why did he have to be too afraid to take that one little step to make it official? And sure, he knew exactly why, had a list the length of the Chinese Wall as to why not, but really none of them really mattered. They just made it all a lot more difficult to just do it.

So here he is, half way through yet another rehearsal not landing his jumps, while Jared is practically breathing down his neck but still not close enough for comfort. He's about ready to crash and burn just to be rid of it all, but no such luck.

Two hours and a lot of yelling about both their incompetence later Jeff is finally done for the day and leaves them alone so they can die in peace. Jared's already flat on the floor like usual, eyes closed, limbs haphazardly stretched out all over the place like a big starfish that washed onto the beach.

It's usually Jared who pretends to just fall onto Jensen whenever they do this, but he could care less about who does what normally. So he sinks down on his knees by Jared sides and slowly lifts himself

over and then onto him, because if there's one thing he has absolutely no talent for it is pretending to fall right on top of the guy he likes.

Jared doesn't even move when Jensen lies down on top of him, just takes a second to rearrange his limbs into a better position and put one of his arms across Jensen's back so he won't slip down. So he just puts down his head onto Jared's chest and enjoys the moment for however long it will last.

After a while Jared rolls onto his side, arm firmly staying in place around Jensen so they both end up on the floor.

"Sorry, but you get kind of heavy after a while," he says finally looking at Jensen.

"Suits you just fine, the way you always fall down on me without even considering exactly how heavy your ass is," Jensen quips back. And maybe this is weird but it is also really nice. He just hopes Jared will stay like this for a little while longer.

"Hey Jen?"

"Yeah."

"Mind if I try something for a second?"

"Try what?"

"You'll see, but if you don't like it you can just tell me to stop, OK?"

"Sure," because Jensen's mind really can't come up with anything Jared could do right here on the floor of Studio 5 that he wouldn't approve of. Then again, he might be a bit preoccupied at the moment. If he really thinks about it there might just be any number of things that could-

But then Jared presses his lips onto Jensen's and thinking is not really an option anymore. And even if it had been, he for sure wouldn't be thinking about stopping him.

It's a really short kiss, too short and kind of soft, more a peck really. And a peck really won't do, so Jensen chases those lips and the next one is more of a real kiss. After that, he kind of loses count, especially after Jared slips his tongue into his mouth and there's really no doubt about exactly it is they are doing. Jared's hands find their way underneath Jensen's shirt, one of them drawing circles into the small of his back while the thumb of the other is stroking his hip bone. In the end it's the need for fresh air that makes them take a break, both of them panting like they just finished the entire six minute run through of the *'World Premiere of Doom'*.

"You okay?" Jared breathes into his ear, hands still driving him crazy stroke by stroke. Really, what is it with people needing to know he's okay? He's not a little princess or something.

"Do I look like I'm not okay with this?"

All that gets him is another peck on his lips and a chuckle that resonates through the both of them the way they are plastered against each other. "No, but I'm still asking because I'm sure this is all new for you, so it might be a bit overwhelming."

"I did kiss before you know!" And no, he's not sounding like a petulant five year old.

"Not guys, you didn't."

"Well," he grudgingly admits, "this sure as hell beats kissing girls, I can tell you."

And that gets him a full on Padalecki grin and another round of making out and if there was ever any doubt about whether or not the goods worked, it's definitely gone when Jared presses in even closer, closing the last bit of space between them. Yep, no doubt at all.

At a certain point, one of them, he's really not sure who, remembers that they actually have places to be and a hurried glance at the clock tells them they are totally late for their next rehearsals. They must be half way through by now so it's probably useless to even go in now. Instead they take off, pull on some sweats over their tights, throw on a hoodie and sneak out of the building and over to the park.

They do some talking then, because Jensen might be fine with living in the moment, but Jared seems to have long term plans for this thing they've got going on and he wants to know they are on the same page. And somehow at the end of the day, the one that started out bad, and only got worse while it crept along in a snail's pace, he ends up in bed, lips bruised and muscles sore due to the cool down they never got to, but utterly happy. Because somewhere along the way he ended up as somebody's boyfriend, and as far as boyfriends go, he's sure Jared will do just fine. He's definitely a great kisser, and with that thought on his mind he falls asleep ready for the next day, the next weeks, with one less thing to worry about.

He wakes up the next day in a surprisingly good mood and somehow his mind has decided that things must look up if he is dating Jared. He makes it through class surprisingly well, his knee holds up, Ms. Ferris has no complaints, and he's actually enjoying it once more, something that hasn't happened for a while now. *Paquita* rehearsal goes off without a hitch as well, his timing with Sandy and Danneel pitch perfect. The lifts take off like they don't cost them effort, and they all head into lunch feeling exhilarated because for the girls this pas de trios is really important and things are finally falling into place.

After lunch he first sits in on the *Swan Lake* pas de trios rehearsal, not doing all that much because the main focus lies on Steve and the girls who are still struggling with one of the partnering sequences. He doesn't really mind sitting this one out though, it just means he'll go relatively fresh into rehearsal with Jeff at three and they all know there's no harm in that.

Jared's already in the studio talking to Jeff when he comes in so they don't really get the chance to talk, let alone kiss some more before they start rehearsing. It doesn't stop them from goofing around whenever they get the chance though, and if they find more than enough time to just touch each other more than they usually would throughout the choreography that's not their fault.

Not even Jeff's harsh and gruff comments and corrections can break through Jensen's good mood today. And when his knee starts to whine after three hours of rehearsing he decides that enough is enough, it's just a rehearsal, he doesn't have to ace all his jumps at the highest level possible. If he jumps clean triples now, it's more than good enough as long as he aces the quadruple when they are on stage. Jeff's lectures fall onto deaf ears and when he lets them out after another hour Jensen feels better than he has for a long time after rehearsing for the '*World Premiere of Doom*'. This might just be the way to go.

They sneak in a make out session on their way to the cafeteria, where he eats an entire warm meal under Danneel's approving gaze. After dinner Jared and Sandy take off to one of the studio's to practice their pas de deux for the *Temperaments* and Jensen decides to finish the day in style. He can't remember the last time he had more than six hours of consecutive sleep, so more than eight are going to be like heaven. Nothing is going to ruin this day, it's just not possible. Little does he know.

When he gets to his room, he finds Jeff waiting for him, leaning against the doorframe.

"Walk with me kid," is all he says before he pushes off from the wall and starts to head into the direction of the elevator. He doesn't speak again until they are seated in his office, door firmly closed, a thick silence hanging between them.

"What do you think you're doing Jensen?" is the first thing Jeff barks out into the silence and it catches Jensen totally off guard. He couldn't know, could he? "Slacking off like that with only weeks to go," Jeff continues loudly, just a notch away from right out yelling. "Not listening to anything I have to say, goofing around with Padalecki!"

"I'm not slacking off," he starts to defend himself, because he's not, he's just taking care of himself for once, not overloading his already aching joints for a change, but Jeff is obviously not done ranting.

"You are and don't you think I'm not seeing it. Jumping the easy jumps, taking short cuts and using every trick in the box to make it easy on yourself. It's not supposed to be easy Jensen! And it sure as hell is not what I'm used to, not from you. Mouthing off behind my back, not taking this seriously at all!"

Jensen tries to get a word in once again, but apparently there is more.

"And if you actually had a good reason for it all, that would be a completely different thing, but you are doing it why? Because of what? For Jared fucking Padalecki! There is a reason I put Jared in that role, do you know why? Because Jared is good, he has talent and ambition and the drive to get better at any cost. And I thought that would drive you to greater heights as well. I foolishly thought you wouldn't want to be upstaged by a kid a year younger and a whole lot less technically trained than you are."

And that's just too absurd for words. He knows Jared's good, hell he put in a good amount of time himself to get him where he is, so why is Jeff lecturing him about this?

"But obviously I was wrong now wasn't I? Because while Jared is using every single second of this to improve his game, you are just slumming it, hanging out with the kid, making him laugh, keeping him happy. This is not about being happy Jensen! If you want to be happy, go teach kindergarten. If you want to be a professional dancer suck it up and get back out there and give it your all. Because Jared, Jared is landing his quadruples and hitting his marks with the precision of a sniper even if you're not."

"Unlike you, Jared knows what this is all about, and he sure knows how to come out of this on top. Kid knows how to play you the way *Stradivarius* used to play his fucking fiddle. And he's definitely going to be the talk of the town after he makes you look like an amateur during workshops, you can be sure of that. Let's see how good of a friend he'll be to you after he's the new big guy in town, shall we?"

Not long after that, Jensen is told to get out, get some sleep and present himself in an orderly manner tomorrow at rehearsal, best behaviour only and with his head back in the game. And all the way back to his room he keeps telling himself that it's not true. Jared likes him, Jared loves him. Jared would never use him for his own gain. He wouldn't!

But the little nagging voice in the back of his head keeps coming up with contradictory evidence. He did spend an awful lot of time helping Jared out, time he would most likely have spent practicing himself otherwise.

And it had been Jared, who told him to take it easy on his knee, who had practically banished him from using the studio's after hours. And Jensen had listened. He had listened to the point where today he just decided to give in to the demands of his body and just give up. Dancers didn't give up; they pushed and pushed until they were so far over the limit that their bodies would just give in and readjust themselves to the demand. Not the other way around.

And they had been goofing off during rehearsal, not just today but before as well. It seemed to be Jared's way to keep from crumbling and Jensen hadn't minded going along with it. He didn't think Jeff would mind, would see it for what it was, but apparently it was Jensen who wasn't seeing things clearly here. And he had mouthed off about the piece and about Jeff's way of rehearsing from the beginning. He never did that before, now that he thinks about it. He just used to think about it as his own personal kind of rebellion against all the expectations that were coming his way. Only he obviously wasn't doing it alone, now was he? No, Jared was always game to complain about what they were doing and he definitely wasn't always quiet about it. Fuck it! He was being played. And he had walked into it head first, eyes wide open. How fucking naïve could he be.

And that stung the worst, that all of it had probably been a farce, the shared confidences over illegal cigarettes in the beginning, the taking care of him before Christmas, the hours and hours of talking they had done ever since, and to top it all off, the concert and yesterday. Jensen had put his fucking heart on the line last night, was days away from calling home and telling his Mom and what did he get in return? It got trampled on, hard.

He's reached his room by now and if he's crying, he has a fucking good reason for it. For just a little while, life had been good, just to return to being fucked up even more than it already was. And tomorrow, tomorrow Jeff expected him to step back into that studio again and pretend nothing had happened and dance. And just the thought of that has him down on his knees in the bathroom, the meal he just ate coming right back out. He just stays there for a while on the cold bathroom floor, thinking about the complete and utter humiliation he will have to go through tomorrow, and for what?

And that's a good question right there. Why should he? He's not even sure if this still is what he wants to do for the rest of his life. Sure he loves to dance, but there are other kinds of dancing, other companies that will suit him just fine and that would be a lot less demanding.

Seriously, if he wants to, he can fly home right now and start dancing at *Dallas Modern Ballet* within the week. Mom has said so more than once. Or he could just make good use of his GED and get into a good college, like normal people do. At least that would give him some time to think about what he really wants to do with his life. And maybe there he would be around people who would like him just because of him, not because of his parents, or his fucking talent or because he was their one way ticket to stardom.

And just like that he knows what to do, and before he can change his mind he grabs his duffel bag from underneath the bed and starts to pack the bare essentials. He won't need that much, just a change of clothes, his wallet, his emergency credit card and something to read. He's packed and out of the door five minutes later, takes the stairs downstairs so he won't run into anyone and sneaks out through the back. He's still crying and the cabdriver gives him a long look when he states where to go, but he doesn't say anything, just starts to drive and the more distance he puts between Jensen and SAB, the surer Jensen gets that this is the right thing to do.

Dallas, Texas

The display on the alarm clock reads *01.15* when the doorbell rings long and loud, waking up everybody in the house. That includes the dogs and Mackenzie, who sleepily sticks her head around the doorpost when Donna makes her way down the hall. Rain clatters onto the roof in a soothing pattern, a Texas summer shower out of the book, although it sounds more like a downpour than a shower right now.

"Go back to bed honey, it's probably just somebody who got lost or whose car broke down and who needs some help."

That wasn't exactly true of course, because those people would be ringing the bell at the gate, not the doorbell. Whoever was at the door had the code to the gate and the amount of people who did was very small. Alan and the guys from the band, the kids, and some of their oldest friends and colleagues. Everybody else could first ring at the gate as far as she was concerned.

Alan and the band were in Europe. Mackenzie was safely upstairs, Josh and Jensen had keys and were miles away and probably fast asleep at school by now, and so at least the kids were all fine. At least that's what she thinks until she passes the security camera screen on her way to the door and immediately recognizes the figure standing there in the pouring rain. She's at the door in record time and seconds after opening it a soaking, crying Jensen is sobbing into her shoulder. She's going to kill Jeff even if he's not involved in whatever has gotten into him. He just let her baby fly home in this state, all by himself in the middle of the night and that was just unacceptable. That however, would have to wait; first she had to fix this, or at least get him into something warm and dry and into bed.

Less than twenty four hours later, she's not a single step closer to knowing what's going on. Jensen is upstairs in bed, calmed down a bit, but not talking. He's crying though, even if he tries to keep it all in whenever she's in the room. She knows he just left last night, without notifying any of his friends or the staff, and a little vindictively she imagines what SAB will look like right now. She has not yet received a phone call and she's damn sure they won't call unless they are damn sure he's not going to be found. She's not going to make them feel any better by calling him in either, they can stew a bit in their own misery.

Because knowing or not knowing, her kid is a mess. Not just emotionally, but also physically. He had been skinny over Christmas break after the entire *Nutcracker* episode but now he was right out skin over bones or in this case skin over muscle over bones. Add to that his near state of exhaustion and he was one over trained wreck in the making.

But none of that was obviously what had him in this state of near catatonia, so it could wait. She had suggested calling Alan, but that had been the one thing he had loudly objected to, coming alive again for a second. She'd promised him not to make that call, but now, hours later and at the end of her string she is going to anyways. She's out of ideas on what to do next and something needs to be done.

The phone rings loud and clear, like there's no ocean between them. According to the schedule on the fridge they should be in or on their way to Paris after finishing up the shows in Berlin last night. When Alan picks up it's with a smile in his voice and she can just see him, looking happy and excited to share the newest talk with her.

"Hi there darling, hold on for a second alright, I'm just going to walk outside where I can actually understand you."

She can hear him talk to the guys, making his way out of the noisy room he's in and into the quiet.

"All right, I'm all yours so tell me what's going on."

And she has to laugh, because it's typically Alan to know that something is wrong even though he's miles away and before she has opened her mouth to tell him so.

"Jen came home last night. He spent most of the night crying and after he was out of tears he just slipped into this scary place where I can't reach him. He won't tell me what happened, just told me he packed up on a whim and that they don't know at SAB. They haven't called in yet, but they probably will later today once it's clear he's really gone. But he won't say anything else Alan. He just lies there staring at the wall and he's still crying. And he's not looking good at all, they must have been working him a lot harder than he told me because he's skin over bones and totally exhausted. I just don't know what to do."

"Pshht..., he's a tough kid, he'll live, it's all going to be all right. I've seen him like three weeks ago when they were at the concert, he seemed just fine, sure a bit skinny and yeah tired, but otherwise fine. He and Jared seemed to be having a good time, no matter how hard Jeff was drilling them for this workshop thing."

"What workshop thing? And who is Jared?"

"You don't know about Jared?"

"Obviously I don't Alan, now who is Jared?"

"Jared is this tall new kid at SAB a year under Jen. They've been cast together in Jeff's new piece. They've been friends for a while I think, they were together at the concert. You sure he never mentioned the kid to you?"

"I'm definitely sure, just as sure as he never mentioned some piece by Jeff he's dancing in."

"Well that might explain at least a bit of it than."

"Why? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm not going to discuss this over the phone honey, not while standing in a parking lot in backwater Luxemburg. I'm coming home, will be there on the first plane I can get."

"Wait Alan, just wait! I asked whether he wanted me to call you and he told me not to. He literally made me promise not to tell you."

"Sure he did, which tells me I'm on the right track here. I'm coming home anyways, he's not doing well and he's not going to get out of it without a little push in the right direction. I'm on my way, until then just keep him safe and loved and feel free to yell loudly at Jeff once he gets up the nerve to inform you that your son is missing."

"Okay, hurry up, all right."

"I'm on my way honey, don't worry too much, he'll be fine, I promise."

New York

Jared's in class when things start to get strange. Jeff comes in, talking in urgent but hushed tones to Ms. Ferris, who goes from uninterested to flat out worry in about five seconds. They can't really catch anything more than 'gone' and 'no note, nothing' but it's enough to have them all speculating. It isn't until lunch however that the news spreads throughout the entire SAB student body.

Jensen is missing.

The news hits like a bomb and for a second Jared wants to laugh it off, because Jensen has no reason to be anywhere but right here with him.

But then he remembers he hasn't seen Jensen since they left to rehearse after dinner last night. Not in the student lounge to watch TV later on last night, not for a quick make out session before bed and definitely not this morning for breakfast.

Until right that second, all of it hadn't seemed too strange, he might have gone to bed early and he might have missed breakfast in order to get some more sleep or because he wasn't all that hungry. And the kissing was so new they couldn't really call it a habit yet. But all of it together definitely didn't make sense. Definitely not when Steve tells them Jensen didn't make it back to their room last night as far as he knows. He just assumed he'd crashed at Chad and Jared's or on one of the couches in the lounge. Both happened before but right now it means Jensen went missing last night, right from under their noses.

Rehearsals get cancelled and they are being called into Mr. Morgan's office. Jared rattles off every single place he thinks Jensen could be from the park to *Carlo's*, goes out looking for him, but they have no luck finding him. Nobody has seen Jensen since dinner last night and nobody knows where he could have gone or why he left in the first place. Jared goes over to Danneel's room and after she makes damn sure he hasn't anything to do with this mess, they take turns calling Jensen's cell phone until Steve comes in to let them know the phone is still in their room, left behind in the charger where Jensen left it yesterday morning to load. Fuck, where would he go without even bringing his phone?

Dallas, Texas

It's late, far too late really, considering what is going on, when the phone finally starts ringing and the display announces an incoming call from New York. Jensen has now officially been gone for more than 24

hours, and the fact that it took them this long to make the call, pisses her off even more than the fact that her kid is upstairs crying himself to sleep once again.

"Ackles residence, Donna speaking."

Silence, and really Jeff could do better than this.

"Hi Donna, it's Jeff."

And she can do silence just as well, so she just lets him hanging there.

"You still on the line?"

"Are you hearing any beeping from this side of the line Jeff?"

"No."

"Well than I'm obviously still on the line waiting to hear about why you are calling in the middle of the night."

"It's eleven, that's hardly--"

"Jeff!"

"Fine, please tell me he's alive and well with you in Texas."

"Who?"

"What?"

"Who should be here with me in Texas?"

"Shit!"

And that serves him right; not even having the guts to tell her Jensen is missing from school. She's about done with this phone call. So she cuts it off. He can try again tomorrow, she for one knows exactly where all three of her kids are. Upstairs, in Jensen bedroom, trying to get him out of his funk.

Josh arrived late this afternoon, furious about not being called earlier, ready to shoot whoever laid hand on his little brother. But even Josh, who usually knows more about Jensen and what he is up to than anyone else, can't get more out of his little brother than she already did.

So instead he'd settled in for the night, determined to not let him go through whatever it was all by himself. Mack had joined them only a few minutes later, curling up around her big brother to keep him safe from whatever was going on. At least, she thinks, she knows she did something right there.

New York

Jeff's at the end of his wit. Sure he had been harsh with the kid, but he has been harsh before and it never seemed to have all that much of an impact. All he had wanted to do was to get him back on track and if he had exaggerated a bit to do so, that should be allowed. And Jensen, who had practically been at SAB half of his life, should know how things like this worked. He should know what part to listen to, and what part to ignore, and what it was Jeff wanted from him. Apparently he had been wrong and now the kid was missing.

He was pretty sure though he was at home in Texas, but since Donna had cut off their phone call he couldn't be sure. And as long as he wasn't sure he also couldn't get things fixed so the kid would come back. And as long as he was gone they were in seriously deep shit. They were closing in on 48 hours now and things were already unravelling at the edges.

He and Samantha had a sit down last night to see about rescheduling rehearsals, getting in the understudies, and keeping the machine moving so they wouldn't get too far behind on schedule. Turned out it was impossible. He hadn't really realised exactly how big the kid's workload had been until he had to refill every single one of Jensen's spots and ended up short. Sure there were understudies but they had more than enough to do themselves and were nowhere near the level he needed them to be to make it all work out just fine in eight weeks.

Not to mention that he didn't even consider getting understudies for the new piece, because there really were only two people at SAB who could dance it, and they were both in the first string cast. He'd danced Jensen's part himself that afternoon, just to keep Jared's head in the game. After an hour he had been more dead than alive. He suddenly got why the boys had been complaining behind his back. It was one thing to put something onto paper, a completely different one to actually act it out on the music while keeping it all technically perfect.

It was deadly and he should have caught onto that before. He used to do this for a living for God's sake, he knew all about idiotic choreographers and their stupid demands. Instead, all he had been doing was yell and complain and make it even harder. He was a fucking idiot. Well at least things couldn't get any worse from here.

Which was exactly when the ten o'clock news came on announcing that *Kings of Suburbia* had cancelled the first of their four concerts in Paris so their lead singer could fly home because of a family emergency. Fuck, Jensen obviously did not just fly home because he was upset with Jeff. That wouldn't warrant Alan to cancel concerts. Something he had no clue about was going on with the kid and obviously he had been to busy to see it.

Dallas, Texas

The thing about getting home while being in the middle of a world tour, is that it takes a lot of unnecessary time. Even though he wants to jump onto the first possible plane back to Texas, things have to be arranged first. It takes the better part of a day. They are on a short break in between concerts, which gives him some time, but probably not enough. Luckily the band backs him up the moment they catch wind of what is going on and they quickly decide on cancelling the first of the Paris concerts. They can and will replay it later on but this way he will have an extra three days to stay at home and make sure Jensen is fine.

Which is a good thing, because the kid looks like hell even while he's asleep, dark bruises underneath his eyes that are thick and swollen from all the crying he must have been doing. But at least he is asleep which apparently is a start. He can sleep first, they'll talk later; Alan owes his wife an explanation first anyways.

They are all sitting downstairs in the kitchen when he comes down. They are waiting for him to explain, sipping their hot chocolates even though it's full on summer outside. It shows how badly this is getting to all of them.

"He still asleep?" Josh asks while he's making himself another cup of hot chocolate.

"Yeah, he looks like he could use it as well, might be out for a while."

He sits down at the table before he continues, "Did Jeff call?"

Donna huffs at that and Josh pulls a grimace. "He called late last night, asked whether Jensen was here. I cut off the call without telling him." Donna responds. "He hasn't tried again, but he will probably figure it out when he hears about the tour."

Jeff was so dead; he just didn't know it yet.

"Now tell me about this Jared kid and why you think he's got anything to do with this."

And yeah that's his wife right there, aiming straight for the heart of the matter.

"Who's Jared?" Mackenzie asks, but Josh stays quiet.

"Josh?" Donna asks.

"New kid at school right?" Alan just nods. "He rooms with The Chad, if I'm informed correctly. Is a year behind Jen as well. He and Jen have been hanging out quite a lot and they are in some thing together that Jeff's making for the two of them. Apparently he's a right shit about it, keeps changing the steps and all that. And Jen got Jared a ticket for Dad's concert as a Christmas present, he was all excited about that, didn't shut up about how much he was going to like it all the way back to the airport after Christmas break. I think he really like that kid."

Apparently, Alan thinks, he's not the only one who has been paying attention, and obviously Jen had at least talked about some of it with Josh.

"I think you are right," he adds, "about the liking part, I just think it's a bit more than that. Maybe a lot more, but I'm not exactly sure about that."

"Exactly what are you implying when you say he likes that boy?"

Alan just looks at his wife for a moment. His wife, who will never stop whacking him over the head whenever he jokingly uses the phrase 'principle example of flamingly gay' to describe any of the gazillion male dancers that cross their doorstep. He should probably stop doing that, even though he never means anything by it.

"Don't play stupid honey, you know what we mean. And I'm not implying, I'm telling you. They had VIP tickets to the show and from where I was standing, and I usually have quite a good view as you might know, it definitely looked like it was a bit more than just being friends. Last time I checked friends don't spend the night plastered against each other or holding hands."

"You saw them? And you didn't think it was something you should have mentioned?"

"No, actually I didn't because they might have been a bit over the line there during the concert, but they didn't do anything to confirm my suspicions, no kissing and no groping, just them standing there pressed against each other dancing. And Jen didn't say anything afterwards, so I didn't press the issue. And he looked happy, and he stayed that way the entire night while I took them out for burgers. He even ate the entire burger and all his fries, which would be the first time in like four years, so I'm not complaining. I liked the kid as well; Jen has good taste if this is what I'm thinking it is."

"Yeah but Dad, if this is heading where I think it's going that might not exactly be the case." Josh says thoughtfully. "You think something might have happened between then and now? They could have had a fight or he might have pushed Jen into doing something he didn't want to do?"

"He didn't seem the pushy type Josh."

"Yeah well, Jen doesn't seem the type for a mental breakdown, but he's having one anyways, so what do we know?"

"Well for one he doesn't want me to know for some reason, because he made your mother promise not to tell me. So clearly I'm part of the problem somehow."

"Well, that's just nonsense, why would he think that?" Donna asks, but he's quite sure that's part of what they are facing. He'd been watching them that night in New York.

The way Jensen had held on to Jared's hand while making his way into his dressing room, only dropping it in exchange for Alan's hug. The way they had been sitting pressed up to each other in *Harvelle's*, side by side, not too obvious, but still maintaining contact at all times. The way he had let Jared do most of the talking, just sitting there soaking it all up. Jensen had it bad and Alan didn't think Jared was that far behind.

And for the love of God he doesn't know why the kid thinks he might object, because he and Donna sure have their fair share of gay friends and they've always tried to instill into the kids that everybody is the same, no matter who they love.

"I'm just saying that some of this might be part of the problem. Because quite frankly I think there's a lot more to it than just this. Like Josh says, it's not like Jensen to just lose it. The kid might get nervous and stressed out, but he never loses it. Not once in all those years, so for this to happen now there has to be more to it than just a boy. The boy might however have been the last drop. We'll just have to wait and see."

And so they do.

They all try to get a good night of sleep and have breakfast together before Alan puts together a tray and brings it upstairs. When he enters the room, it looks like Jensen is still asleep at first, but when he goes over to put the tray down on the nightstand he can see he's not. He's just staring blankly at the wall in front of him.

He sits carefully down on the edge of the bed, putting a hand on Jensen's shoulder, squeezing it a bit.

"Hey kiddo, I brought you something to eat if you wanna try something?"

At first he doesn't react at all, but after a while he turns further towards the wall, burying down into his pillow, hiding. It's just really hard to hide away if you're six feet tall.

"Hey Jen, come on, turn around, there's no reason to hide, it's just you and me in here."

When he doesn't move, Alan just lies down on the bed, and hugs the kid to his chest, he doesn't care if the kid is about to turn eighteen, he's still Alan's little boy and right now he needs a hug. This is worse than he thought it would be and obviously it's going to take a lot more than breakfast, to make Jensen talk. After a while he starts to relax at least, turning into the hug a bit, letting Alan pet his head, combing his fingers through the fine blond hair that is getting a bit too long if he knows anything anymore about his son's taste.

What he does know is that he's getting closer to talking. They've done this before, when Jensen was little and had a bad dream. They'd lie like this until he had everything back under control, knew what was real and what not. Once they got to that point they would talk, about the dream but also about other stuff until Jensen went back to sleep.

When it finally comes, it breaks his heart a bit, because the, "Dad?" comes out so small and desperate he just wants to wrap the kid up and hold him forever. Instead he just waits for the rest of it. It's not really what he expected.

"I'm really, really stupid." And he's not, there's a GED with an excellent GPA lying around somewhere in the house that proves that statement to be absolutely wrong, but somehow he thinks Jensen is not talking about book smarts. Still, it won't hurt to deny that little fact.

"No you're not, and you know that kiddo."

"Well if I'm not, why has my life turned into such a fucking mess?"

"Last time I checked, it didn't look all that messy Jen." Because if that wasn't an opening, what will be?

"But it is. Nothing is going the way I want it to, and I don't know what to do about it, or how to fix it, and it's just getting worse and worse."

He's crying again, Alan can feel it even if he can't see it, quiet sobs wracking through his body.

"Hey, why don't you just tell me what's wrong and we'll see if we can find a way to fix it together. Two people usually tend to see more than one. Just start with one thing and we'll go from there, OK?"

"My knee is hurting again, and I tried to give it some rest, but workshops are coming up and we are full on rehearsing and there's just not enough time and I don't know what to do about it."

And shit, if the knee is playing up again, that's no good. The fact that nobody seems to know about it, is even worse. It probably means they don't know at school either, because Jensen didn't tell them like he should have.

"Did you tell Jeff?"

"No."

"Why not Jen, you know that's important stuff he needs to know, especially after how things went down last time. We discussed this kiddo, you *promised* not to do that again."

"Mom *promised* not to call you, she obviously didn't keep hers!"

And that right there, that tiny spark of indignation about a promise not kept, that's all he needs. It means there is still some fight left in the kid, he just has to find it and than use it.

"Well, she *promised me* to call whenever something is wrong with you a long time ago, so I'm pulling seniority here kid. And no changing the subject. That knee is serious business Jensen, and you know it. It's not something you should be keeping to yourself."

"I know! It's just, he's been on my case al year and he's pushing and he keeps saying I have to step it up if I want the NYCB contract after the summer. He'll be mad if I can't perform at workshops. He thinks I'm slacking anyways, he'll just say I'm making it up."

"He's going to do absolutely no such thing. And it's easy enough to find out whether you're making this up or not, we'll just have the get a scan at the hospital and we'll go from there. But it's hurting, which it shouldn't, so obviously something is wrong and you shouldn't be pushing it."

"But all the other people push through the pain all the time. We're supposed to push through the pain dad. It's part of the job. If you stop the moment it hurts you might as well go and be a football player."

"Jensen, we are not having this conversation again. We've discussed this before in length. There is pain you can push through and then there is *chronic* pain. As soon as there are any signs of *chronic* pain, you go and see a doctor, especially if it's located in the knee that took a five hour operation, and six months of rehabilitation, to get fixed the last time it hurt. You don't want it to be damaged beyond repair, do you now?"

"What if I wanted it to be? What if that would be exactly what I want!" and yeah, there it was, the truckload of anger that the kid usually stored up for moments like this.

"Maybe that's exactly what I want, because it would mean I couldn't dance anymore and they can all go and find themselves a new puppet they can tell what to do."

"Hey, there's nobody telling you what to do here, all right? Wherever you go after the summer is up to you, and only you."

"Everybody keeps saying that, but it's not true! They are all pushing me into signing with *NYCB*, and they won't even give me the chance to find my fucking bearing in one of the best companies in the world by letting me start out on the bottom of the food chain. No, they are talking *soloist* or if they feel like it even *principal*. And they never even asked they just assumed I want it just as bad as them. They feel they have the right to do that because they got me there, like I wasn't even involved in whole entire process. Jeff probably has the contract already lying around on his desk, but he still likes to tell me I'm not going to get it if I don't man up and step it up a notch. Like I fucking owe it to him!"

"Hey, hey, calm down a bit. I'm sorry you feel that way, okay. You shouldn't. And they shouldn't be pushing you into accepting an offer you don't want even if it's a great offer. If you want to dance in the *corps*, you'll go dance *corps* for a while. And they can jump high and low; they are not going to change that. If you're that good, you'll make your way through the ranks fast enough. And if they say you can't dance *corps* for them, you'll just go somewhere else. I'm sure there're plenty of places you could go and audition for if you wanted to."

"I already got some invites to come and audition."

"You see, that's great. Anything good?"

"Yeah, there's *San Francisco Ballet* and *The Royal Ballet* and the *Berlin State Opera* and *Scapino* which is more contemporary but still with classic roots so that would be neat as well."

"Where's that again?"

"Holland, but not in Amsterdam I think, I'd have to check."

"All right, you see plenty of options. And you know you don't have to pick one all by yourself. I know we always say you should make up your own mind, but that doesn't mean you can't discuss it with us. We just don't want to push you one way or the other. The final decision should be yours. But Mom sure would be able to give you good advice on what company would fit your needs and I've probably been in any city you could end up with, so we can see which one will be a good fit. And you know, if it's really that horrible and you're really done with it, there's no shame in quitting it all together."

Donna is going to kill him if she ever hears he said that, but it's true. Ballet puts unbelievable demands onto people and the only way to make it through in one piece is if your heart is in it 100%. If that's not the case you might as well stop.

"Mom will have your head if she hears you say that!" And yeah, his kid is too smart for his own good.

"I know, but I still mean it. A long, long time ago, we let you go of to New York because it was what *you* wanted to do. If you hadn't wanted to go, Jeff could have pushed and pulled as much as he wanted, we would have kept you right here with us talent or no talent.

Talent only goes as far as you make it go, and if you decide being an accountant is what will make you happy than you're going to be an accountant. Feel free to go and waste all that talent on something that makes you happy, but don't go and waste it because of all the wrong reasons. But promise me you'll think it through, because there's nothing worse than throwing your life away because you had a second of doubt. We all doubt, it's human."

"I don't really want to quit, I just- I just had to go you know, I just couldn't stay there even a second longer and I definitely couldn't walk into that rehearsal the next day and just-"

“Just what?”

“Jeff yelled at me that night right before I left. He said some things and I just- I don’t know whether he’s right, but he might be and if he is I just can’t go back Dad. I can’t.”

And somehow they are back to Jensen being a crying mess and it’s obvious that something happened that night, something that made the entire, carefully build up card house that was Jensen’s world come crashing down.

He just hugs him tight again, lets him cry and tells him to let it all out. They’ve come this far, they’ll get to the rest of it, he’s got time. Once Jensen’s calmed down a bit Alan remembers the breakfast he brought upstairs and he makes sure Jensen eats at least some of it before they continue. Instead of letting Jensen tell him however, he decides to jump ship and go straight for the heart.

“So can I ask you something?”

Jensen just nods, propped up against the wall, cocooned in his comforter and the quilt his grandmother made him for his very first Christmas. Alan just slides in next to him so they sit side by side, his arm around Jensen’s shoulders because he thinks contact is going to be important, now more than ever.

“What’s Jared’s role in this entire mess?”

And from the way Jensen’s face goes from tired to livid to utterly defeated he knows he struck gold in some way or another. Of course he’s not getting the story that easily.

“Who says Jared has something to do with it?”

“Well I didn’t, I just thought that as your friend he might have an opinion on most of this, and you might have discussed some of it with him and I’m sure he’s worried about you since you probably went all AWOL on him.”

“He’s not my friend.” And he might have meant for it to come out angry or harsh, but somewhere along the way it had turned into something soft and desperate.

“I know he’s not just your friend Jen. I know! He’s a whole lot more. And you know what, that’s fine with me.”

“You’re not supposed to know about that.” It comes out quiet and resigned.

“I know, but I do and like I said I don’t care. Not as long as he makes you happy. And he seemed to last time I saw you.”

“He might have done so, for a while at least.”

“What happened there, kiddo? Looked to me like what you had going on was a good thing. And I know you don’t want me to know about any of that, but as your Dad it’s my right to kick his ass if he did anything at all to hurt you, or if he made you do something you’re not comfortable with. It’s why I own a shotgun.”

“There’s really no need to shoot people dad. It wasn’t anything real when you were in New York anyways.”

“Looked real enough to me mister, the way you were plastered to his chest most of that concert. And holding hands-“

“Oh my God, you were totally *not* supposed to see that. How *did* you see that?”

"You were standing right there in the middle of the front section kid, it's not exactly a dark spot. There were like four people between you and the stage, I can see like ten rows into the crowd without any trouble. You want to make out with your boyfriend without being seen, try standing in the back next time. Seriously, do you kids not know anything important these days?"

"You didn't say anything though."

"I told you to call me whenever you wanted to talk about anything at all. That was as much an open invitation as I could give you without right out asking."

"Well you could have asked and I still wouldn't have told you because it wasn't anything. Not yet."

"So something did happen later on then?"

"He kissed me, the day before I came home. And it was nice, so we kissed some more and we talked about dating and stuff and telling people you know, make it official. I was going to call Mom this week and tell her, I really was."

"Yeah well, I might have just kind of done that for you during breakfast. She was suitably shocked and than yelled at me for not telling her. She's fine now though, so don't you worry about it, okay?"

"Well there's nothing to tell anymore anyways."

"Why? What did he do?"

"It's not like *that*, it's just that Jeff- Jeff said some stuff. Stuff about Jared, and he might be right and if he is it was all just for show and it can't be, it just can't because I fucking love him and if he just faked it all I don't know what to do Dad, I just don't know what to do."

And there it is the thing that is really bothering him. Jeff said something about Jared and it must have had to do with dancing as well, because otherwise he wouldn't have been saying it. And somehow Jensen seemed to think that Jared didn't love him anymore and had been faking it the entire time. He's crying again, and Alan gets it. He's scared and desperate and he doesn't know what to do because he doesn't know who to believe anymore. He's stuck in limbo with no way out.

"Jensen, it's going to be all right, I promise. We'll go and figure it out. I'm sure there's a misunderstanding somewhere in there, we'll just have to track it down. Why don't you lie down and try and get some more sleep and when you're feeling a bit better again, we'll see about what to do."

He stays there, right beside the bed until he's sure the kid is asleep once more before he heads downstairs to bring the rest of the family up to date.

From there on they proceed rapidly and without hesitation. The first call is to Dallas General, to make an appointment for a scan while in the meantime he books Donna a ticket to New York. Somebody needs to have a talk with Jeff, and Jensen needs his stuff even though he left most of it there for a reason. But the terms on which he'll go back are up to him, he and Jeff can fight that fight another time.

Part Six

New York

They are five days in and there's still no word from Jensen. Danneel thinks he's at home in Texas and she might be right because KOS cancelled part of their tour so Jensen's dad could fly back home, but they are still not sure and it's driving him crazy. He would probably go completely nuts if it wasn't for the fact that they still have a lot of work to do even though it's disintegrating right in front of their eyes.

It's a fact by now that Jensen can't be replaced. They are trying but it's just not going to work. But it's not just that. Jensen used to help out a lot of people after hours working out the kinks in their routines. He also used to keep up morale no matter what. Now that he's gone everybody is ten times as stressed and getting desperate. And there's nothing they can do to fix any of it. It's crazy how much of an impact one person can have on that many people without them ever noticing.

And then, all of a sudden lots of things are happening all at once. They have class like usual, Mr. Morgan is teaching it, but he doesn't seem to be paying all that much attention to what they are doing. When the tell tale sound of a pair of high heeled shoes makes its way to the studio, none of them pay much attention to it either.

At least not until the studio door opens. What happens next is at once a thing of terrible beauty as well as frightening like hell. It will also definitely make it into the annals of SAB history for many years to come.

Jensen's mom, and there is no way anybody in that studio is in doubt of who exactly *she* is, strides right across the studio on a pair of scary looking five inch steel tipped black stiletto's and slaps Mr. Morgan right into the face. The lady has a perfectly fine right hook if Jared has to say so. Mr. Morgan will probably agree, the way he goes down.

"That," she says while looking menacingly down at him, "was just a taste of what will be waiting for you when you make it to your office after you're done with this class Jeffrey."

And having said that, she stalks out again, leaving an impressive silence in her wake.

Obviously Mr. Morgan is in a whole lot of trouble. And maybe now they will finally find out what on earth is going on.

When he finally makes it to his office after finishing up class early and stopping by the kitchen to grab an icepack to put on his jaw, Donna is sitting in his chair, leaving the chair the students usually use for him to sit on. He opts for leaning against the file cabinet, well out of the range of her insanely hard right hook.

"Is Jensen okay?"

She just pulls up a very unimpressed looking eyebrow at him.

"Tell me Jeff, would I be here if Jensen was okay? Wouldn't Jensen being okay mean that Jensen would be here, not back home in Dallas?"

"But to answer your question, *no*."

"Jensen is not okay. Actually Jensen is currently undergoing an MRI scan in Dallas General because his knee is the size of a volleyball, a fact which *you* failed to notice, because *you* were too busy planning his unprecedented rise into the ranks of NYCB."

"A future by the way, he doesn't seem to be particularly excited about and about which *you* never, not even once, asked his opinion. Instead you just push and push and when the pushing doesn't seem to have the wanted effect, *you* just keep piling more and more work onto his shoulders. And then to top it all off, *you* decided to choreograph and cast him in your new piece. And we all know you are a brilliant choreographer, but we also are all very well aware of the fact that the way you take to get to the end product is not the most conventional and in no way suited for a pair of overworked teenagers who haven't even finished their training. So please tell me Jeff, what on Earth do you think you are doing?"

"I don't know."

"You *don't* know?"

"My kid flew back home after you talked to him a week ago. Flew back home to Texas in the middle of the night all by himself and when he finally got there he spent the next two days crying his heart out. And all you have to say for yourself is 'I don't know'! You need to do better than that Jeff, because Alan is about five seconds away from flying down here and shooting you, and I'll let him if you won't come up with something better."

"Damn it, Donna! I was just trying to get him what he deserves to have. He deserves to stand on that stage and be seen. He shouldn't be standing somewhere in the back waving a rose. Every day he does would be an utter waste of his talent. And you *know* that. But to get him up there I need him to show people he'll be up to the task. I need him to show the board and the patrons that he's not a waste of their money. But I can't do that if he's not cooperating!"

"Oh for God's sake come off your high horse will you. When has he not been cooperating? I'm sure he hasn't told you no once in all those years he's been here. He lives to please you and your damn ego, and all you ever see is him not doing his best. He's been dancing for weeks with that knee. He has been rehearsing your stupid new piece with that knee. And I know you, you didn't choreograph them something nice and easy, it's probably filled to the brink with the nastiest technical features ever invented in ballet. And you are telling me you didn't notice once that something was wrong? That he wasn't landing jumps he usually would land with his eyes closed. That he was trying to get the pressure of by hurrying through the right footed sequences?"

And shit, he absolutely did but instead of thinking about *why*, he had immediately jumped to a conclusion. He'd looked at it and he'd decided Jensen was slumming it. Had said as much to him that night in the office. The kid hadn't been slumming; he had been trying to make it through the rehearsal relatively unharmed. Christ.

"Shit! I'm sorry, all right. I should have seen it, it's just- Why didn't he say anything? If it has been bothering him, he should have come and said something so we could have checked it out."

"Well as far as I understood, you've been on his case ever since September and even though you think he doesn't get how important all of this is, he does! And he doesn't want to disappoint any of you and he seems to think that would be exactly what would happen if he tells you stuff like this. That, or if I heard correctly, you would tell him not to whine because you were not planning on cutting him some slack anytime soon. To me that practically implies you think my son makes up injuries in order to get out of training."

"I never said that!" and really he didn't at least not recently. He might have implied something like it sometime before Christmas, but he hadn't really meant it than.

"And none of this makes any sense anyways. I get that his knee is bothering him, which is making things hard but it doesn't explain why he just packed up and left. It's not like this is the first time I sat him down and told him to get his act together. I've literally done so at least another dozen times. What makes this so different, because really it wasn't?"

"Oh but it was, you just don't realize do you?"

"Realize what? What did I do but yell at him like I always do?"

"This time around you didn't just yell at him Jeff; you brought Jared into the equation."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, what has that to do with it? Sure Jared has talent and I might have played that up a bit but the kid should *know* better. He practically taught Jared most of the stuff anyways."

"You are obviously missing the point here."

"What point?"

"The one where the two of them like each other an awful lot and just started dating when you had to come along and ruin it all by telling Jensen about how Jared apparently is 'only using him to further his own career'. Sound familiar?"

"What? They've been dating? Since when? And why am I the fucking last person to hear about this?"

"Well officially, since the day before you decided it was a brilliant idea to pitch them against each other. Unofficially I would say they've been heading that way for quite a while now. Not that I would know because my kid talks even less to me than he does to you apparently!"

At least that made him feel a bit better about the entire situation, but really, he had royally messed this up.

"And you don't know about these things because you don't talk to them or pay them any attention outside of those studios these days. Not like you used to do. If you would, you would know this kind of stuff. I'm sure there's just as much gossip around this place now as there used to be when we were still kids running around these halls in tights."

"I'm trying to run a company you know, I don't have the time to--"

"Jeff come on, I run my own company, I know how this works, but if you don't have the time to do both, the school and the company, hand it over. Don't get one of those people who are just there to yell and judge but don't know the kid they are yelling at. It's not the way to make things work, and it's not the way you have been running this place ever since you got your hands on it, and it's definitely not the way you are going to be treating my son."

And she was right, ever since he took over as artistic director of both SAB and NYCB he had tried to stay in touch with his students as well as his dancers. Had made it his business to know what was going on because usually happy people made even better dancers, something so many directors had not understood when he and Donna had still be on that stage.

"You want me to hand over the place?"

"Oh, don't be a drama queen! Just delegate or find somebody you trust to do most of the heavy lifting. Somebody who has the time to keep up with their antics while you are of being the dashing artistic director of NYCB. Let Samantha do a bit more than just yell '*plié*' at the little monsters for God's sake."

"Fine, fine I'll look in to it, all right?"

And he would, because she might just have decked him, but she still was one of the best friends he had. One of the oldest as well. They knew each other in and out and if she said something had to change, obviously something had to change.

"Good! Now tell me you made that up, the part where Jared used Jensen. Because if you didn't and it's true, we are truly and utterly fucked. He's not going to come back if that's how it really went down."

Christ!

"Of course I made that up. Hell, the kid doesn't have a bad bone in his body, squeaky clean and polite as well. You'll like him he takes good care of Jen, makes him eat and stuff like that. He was a God's gift just before Christmas. I didn't know or I wouldn't have meddled in their love life. Which, by the way, involves boys exactly since when for Jensen?"

"Beats me, but if I had to guess I would say since the day Jared set foot in SAB."

"And here I was, thinking you would not only have a son who will rock the stage, but a daughter-in law dancing for *NYCB* next season as well. Go figure! Now, to get back to the business at hand. You have any clue about when that scan will be done? And could we see if they can send us a copy of the results as well?"

She just looks at him for a moment, one perfect eyebrow raised up high.

"We," she starts of, "will do absolutely nothing. *You*, will go sit here and think about how you are going to fix this mess you created. *I* will go and pack my kid's stuff and fly back to Texas where *I*, will get the test results and tell Jensen that there might have been a misunderstanding about the entire Jared situation. I'll then, try to talk him into considering coming back if the knee situation will let him."

"*When*, and only *if* he says yes, we will fly down here sometime next week and you and he will talk. As civilised people who mutually respect each other. *He* will tell you what he wants to do and you'll make it happen. If it turns out that what *he* wants to do is wave a rose in the back of the *corps* at the *Berlin State Opera*, you'll get him a spot to audition there. If he wants to go to Holland and do contemporary for the next few years, *you'll* call in all your favours and get him an audition there."

And suddenly Jeff vividly remembers why most people used to stay far, far away from her whenever she got like this. She was down right scary if she wanted to be.

"*You* will not, under any condition tell him what to do and the words 'you owe us' will not come out of your mouth at any time during this conversation. Because Jeff, he owes neither you nor anybody else anything. He's the one who has been putting in the years of backbreaking work."

"Once you're done discussing what will happen after he graduates, you can tell him exactly how you are planning to fill his time up to graduation. And I can tell you now; if I'm coming to that workshop performance and he's on stage in more than three pieces I'll have your head on a platter anyways. You'll watch him and that knee and if he looks tired or in pain you'll fucking cut into your program and not into my kid, do we understand each other?"

"Yeah." and really what else could he say to that? She obviously had put a lot of thought into it and none of it was unreasonable. As long as Jensen came back and finished what they had started they should be happy because right now it was all turning into a major catastrophe.

"You know where to find his room?"

"9th floor if I've been informed correctly."

"Yeah, last door on the right side," he says. "It will probably be hard to miss though; I'm guessing there will be some people waiting for you. They all have been asking about what's been going on and you obviously are a much better source of information than I am."

"Well I would have shared if you would have had the guts to call me earlier. Or maybe even if you would have told me straight up when you called twenty four hours after he disappeared. Well, I'm off; I have a flight to catch. If you feel daring, give us a call tomorrow, I might just feel like sharing some test results."

And with that she was out of his office. Sometimes he was seriously glad he never married that woman, she still could scare the living daylights out of him on occasion.

Jeff obviously was right about the kids being worried. The moment the elevator door pinged open, they were on her like bees on a jar of honey, shooting of questions. Luckily she knew most of them, had met them during breaks and performances.

"Chad, what in God's name is that on your head young man?" Because really a Mohawk on a classical dancer? What had happened to the rules and regulation? They all looked a bit rough around the edges. Tired, worried, so she gives them all the short abridged version of what has been going on. That Jensen's knee has been bothering him and that they are having it checked out in Texas but that he'll be back as soon as possible if everything turns out to be fine. They seem to believe her and after a few more questions they scatter leaving her behind in an empty hallway.

She walks to the end of it checking out the name plates on the doors, buying herself some time. There had been some people missing before at the elevator. Danneel for one, Chris would probably have made it over as well. Steve hadn't been there either and of course she still had to spot the one person she really wanted to meet. They were probably all in that room waiting for her and she was quite sure they would not be all that easily deterred.

With a knock, she starts to open the door and it gives, letting her step into the double room. As so many years before, SAB still hasn't stooped down to giving its seniors a single. To her surprise however, there's only one person in the room though and she's packing a bag.

"Hi Danny," she says, hugging her surrogate daughter to her chest. "How are you doing honey?"

"Kind of crappy, mostly due to the fact that your son backed out and left, leaving me without a partner for the workshops, but we are making do so I can't complain."

"He had good reasons to leave, if that helps."

"Sure, as long as he hauls his ass back here in the end. Are you checking out his knee? Cause Jared says it has been bothering him and I meant to tell you, but we've all been busy and it just kept slipping my mind."

"They are scanning it right now. We'll have the results later today. And I'm sure Jeff is going to monitor it with a vengeance if Jen comes back."

"Good, because we can't have him stumbling around on one leg, we need him intact. Did he tell you about the other thing as well?"

"Would that be the 'I don't want to be a principal at NYCB' thing or the 'I'm in love with Jared' thing?"

She gets a cheeky grin in answer to that one.

"Both I guess, but mostly the Jared thing. He was worried about what you would say about that, but I told him it would be fine. But he still worried his pretty head off."

"Well, I think we were rather clear over the last few days that we really don't care either way as long as he loves somebody who loves him back and makes him happy. We'll see if this Jared kid can manage to do exactly that," she said with great sarcasm.

"Don't go and be mean to Jared, he's nice and he takes good care of Jen most of the time. He just isn't as skilled as we are in Jensen speak. But he'll get there. Or maybe Jensen will actually tell him what's on his mind like a normal person. It has happened before. I was totally amazed."

"Well, he sure sounds nice from what I keep hearing. I'm just not believing it until I'm seeing it and getting to meet the kid turns out to be exceedingly hard."

Danneel laughs at that. "Actually," she says, "that's my fault. They were all here, Chris, Steve and Jared, but I told them to go and get some coffee or take a walk, because they were driving me crazy and half the floor was lying in wait for you in front of the elevator so I thought you might like to have some quiet time to pack. Sorry!"

"He was there though, when you floored Mr. Morgan during class this morning so you could have met him then. He was duly impressed by the way. Apparently you have the most awesome right hook he's ever seen."

"Dear God, that was not the first impression I was going for, but it will have to do I guess. Now let's get this stuff packed so I can get my flight and you can get your men and tell them Jen is just fine and will probably be back within a week. And I'm taking his cell, so they can always call to check in on him after tonight. I'm sure he would like that and if not he'll just give in anyways after they call him a dozen times and let it ring."

It's exactly a week later when Jensen makes his way back to SAB. He's on strict doctor's orders, but the knee will be fine if he sticks to them. He's been on the phone with a lot of people over the last week. Danneel yelled at him for half an hour for just leaving her there, then continued to mother him for the next half an hour before handing of the phone to Sandy who single-handedly is keeping him up to date on all the SAB gossip.

It took a while before he could even think about answering Jared's calls though, even now he knew that it all had been a stupid mistake. But still, he didn't know what to say, or what *not* to say; he couldn't just tell Jared what happened. Because that meant telling him he believed it.

And clearly Jared would be mad, because obviously Jensen didn't trust him and thought he was a fraud. And he would have every right to be mad because really, Jensen had just been stupid. And maybe Jared didn't want to date somebody as stupid as Jensen.

In the end he calls Jared's cell when he knows for sure it won't be picked up. And he leaves a long voicemail explaining all of it, because it's easier if Jared's not physically there on the other side of the line. Jared stops calling afterwards. And Jensen's not sure what that means, just that it sucks.

Jeff locks them into his office for three hours after he arrives and they discuss practically everything they can come up with. They haven't talked like this for a long time and Jensen freely admits he missed it. And at least now they are back on one line again. Jeff knows Jensen hasn't decided yet on what to do after graduation, but has offered to help no matter what he decides and if Jensen decides on *NYCB*, they'll discuss the how and what when the time comes. They've figured out his schedule as well, with lots of rest and PT for his knee and a reduced work load for the workshops.

When he finally walks out of Jeff's office, Jared is sitting on the floor in front of the door, long legs stretched across the hallway reading a book for his Spanish class.

They just stare at each other for a moment, before Jensen decides staring at his sneakers will save him from whatever is going to come.

Jared has other plans however. He pulls his six foot frame up from the floor, tosses the book into his bag and steps right into Jensen's space.

"Hey," he says softly to Jensen, who studiously keeps looking at his own toes. "I thought I'd come and pick you up before anybody else snatches you away from me for lunch. They can be mean like that."

Not exactly what Jensen was expecting. He looks up and meets Jared's eyes, biting his lower lip.

"I thought we could go to the park, have some lunch, do some talking," Jared continues, nothing in his demeanour giving a hint as to what he is really feeling right now. Just a smooth, collected kind of calmness, which is so not Jared.

"All right, the park," Jensen finally manages to bring out, "The park is fine, we can eat and talk. Talking would be good."

They find their way to the exit without much being said. Summer finally found its way to the city, warming the streets while they make their way to the park, only stopping to get a burrito to go.

Instead of making their way towards one of the meadows though, Jared takes a left and leads them over to the large boulders overlooking one of the playgrounds. This conversation is obviously going to happen on Jared's terms and that includes location.

Jared climbs onto one of the rocks, spreads out into the sun and starts to unpack his burrito. Jensen, unsure of what to do next, sits down beside him.

"So," Jared says once he's situated, "Talk."

Right, apparently Jensen is the one who should do the talking.

"What do you want me to say?" he starts out, because really he said everything he had to say in that voicemail he left and he's not sure what it is Jared is looking for.

"How about you explain again why on earth you believed a fucking word Mr. Morgan said about me using you to advance my career!"

And there it is; the barely contained rage he had been afraid of.

"Or why, after hearing that, you felt the only right thing to do was to just pack up and leave without even talking to me?"

"I- I just had to get out of there alright! I just had to go and Jeff gave me a reason, so I took it. I didn't want to, but right there and then, it sounded absolutely plausible and it was that little bit extra that was necessary to push me of the edge. In the end it had probably less to do with you and an awful lot with all the other mess that was going on and on in my head."

He's met by silence, by Jared staring up into the cloudless sky.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, because he is and he knows he didn't handle this the way he should have. And he probably ruined the one good thing he had going.

"I just didn't know what to do anymore; I didn't mean to hurt you. I definitely didn't mean to fuck us up. It's the one freaking thing that kept me going as long as it did. The only thing that kept me from going absolutely batshit insane months ago. And I know you are mad at me right now, and you have every right to be mad after everything I did, but I was just hoping that once you are done being mad we could maybe go back to how things were before- Yeah, like before, you know. I totally understand if you don't want me anymore, but maybe we can still be-"

Friends had been what he wanted to say. Because even though he wasn't sure he would survive not being Jared's boyfriend anymore, he was very sure of the fact that no longer being even friends would be the end of him. Unfortunately, he doesn't get to say it, because by the time he makes it to that part of his speech, Jared suddenly turns onto his side and smacks their lips together into a hard bruising kiss that steals his breath.

"Sometimes, Jensen Ackles," he says when they come up for air, "you are the most stupid, ignorant, idiotic fool that ever set foot on Manhattan soil. And if you think you can get rid of me that easily, I'm going to disappoint you. I'm not going anywhere. I just wish you would talk to me sometimes about what is going on in your life. It would make this a lot easier."

"I know. I'll try, I promise. But it's mostly stupid stuff. Like what to do or where to go once I'm done here. And how to not disappoint anybody while I'm at it."

"Sounds like pretty important stuff to me," Jared says while pulling Jensen closer. There's a rock digging in his side but he doesn't care. They are going to be all right, that's all that matters.

June 2010 – New York

Somewhere between PT and rehearsal for *Paquita*, making his way through the last pages of *The Deathly Hallows* while lying stretched out on the couch in the student lounge with a sleepy Jared plastered against his side, things all fall into place. The last few weeks have been good, Jensen thinks. The schedule he set up with Jeff when he came back last month is doing its job, balancing the right amount of rest with the necessary amount of dancing and PT to keep his knee happy. He's been talking to his Mom on the phone regularly, sifting through the interested parties, making tentative plans to fly out to Europe to go and see some people, do some auditions. But somehow the drive to finalize those plans, the enthusiasm to go and conquer the world on one of Europe's stages is missing. And he might not be ready to freely admit it, but he's pretty sure it's all Jared's to fault.

Jared, who has another year to go at SAB, who won't be coming along when Jensen goes off to try his luck in Europe. And that makes it a whole lot less appealing. Mom says not to stay for a boy, especially if the boy is talented enough to follow. If it's for real, it will still be real in a year. Dad, checking in from Moscow, just laughed long and hard when Jensen explained, and told him to follow his heart. It's what he did when he fell in love with a scary prima ballerina. Worked out just fine for him. And Jared, Jared just looked at him with a strange little smile when Jensen asked him about what to do. No stay or go, just a smile and a kiss on his forehead before he buried his head back into Jensen's shoulder, ready to doze off.

It's his decision to make, his future, his life. His career as well. And all of a sudden, he knows what he's going to do, where he wants to be, where he belongs. All that's left is to set all the appropriate wheels into motion. And he definitely knows where to start.

Epilogue

July 2010 –New York

The theatre is filled up to the last seat with friends and family, scouts and artistic directors as well as half of the New York art scene. The workshops have been advertised broadly this year, even wider than usual, because of Jeff's world premiere and the interest has been overwhelming. The press is well represented and they've all been photographed before the performance. Jensen has just come off stage, done with *Paquita* which got them a standing ovation. He meets Jared in the wings where he is waiting to make his big entrance for the *Four Temperaments*.

They only have time for a quick good luck kiss and then the music starts up and Jared is off. Jensen walks over to the dressing room, where the only costume still waiting for him is the one for the '*Premier of Doom*'. Of course by now it has officially been named something appropriately bombastic, but he and Jared insist on calling it *Doom* whenever they can get away with it, which is quite often really.

They are up last, right after the *Swan Lake* pas de trios that follows after *Four Temperaments*. Jensen has all the time in the world to dress, but Jared will have to pull off a quick undress and change, so he's going to make sure he's done so he can help if needed. He slips out of his red jacket and slips his under shirt over his head. The white tights follow them onto the floor.

To their great surprise Jeff had decided that contemporary costumes would give the entire thing a bit more cachet, so they get to wear these nice stretchy dance pants that fit like a glove in all the right places but have normal legs. They come with nice simple black shirts and all of it seems to be designed for pure comfort. When he's done dressing he rolls up the pants so he can tape his knee. It's holding up alright considering he already was on stage twice, but he's going to take no risks whatsoever right now, so he tapes it nice and tight, just like the physical therapist had showed him.

He can tell the exact moment the Intermediate section is done with *The Four Temperaments*, the applause easily reaching to where he is sitting when one of the stage doors open, and it is well deserved. He'd seen them perform during the dress rehearsal last week and they had done a fantastic job with it. Jared storms into the dressing room minutes later, all out of breathe and flushed, already trying to pull his jacket of over his head, which was a foolproof way of getting stuck.

"Dude, just unbutton it or we'll still be standing here tomorrow morning."

Luckily Jared listens for once and pulls the jacket back down.

"If you know so well, why don't you help, huh. Four hands make for much faster work as we all know."

And Jensen's so not going to think about exactly what Jared is referring to, because he has to be on stage in less than five minutes and he could do without the hard on, thank you very much.

"Just shut up and loose the tights Padalecki, and don't even think about saying what you are thinking about saying right now." he orders while quickly unbuttoning the jacket and pushing it over Jared's shoulders. The shirt follows and within minutes Jared is dressed and pressed and they are back stage again, keeping their muscles warm and loose, ready for the six minutes of torture everybody out there came out to see. When Steve and the girls make it off the stage and the curtain closes Jensen walks over to the other side of the stage, relishing the last seconds of silence he'll get today. This is what he likes most about performing, the minutes before the curtain opens when you can stand on the stage and do anything without the audience seeing it. There's no time for that however today, the bell is already ringing telling them there's only one more minute before the music will start. The lights go out, the curtains open and the music cues in.

After that there's only the stage, the music and Jared. And this immensely difficult but beautiful series of steps he has to perform. And no matter how much he hated every single minute of the process in which they were created, once they had been written down and they had started to get the hang of it, it had

turned into a work of beauty. Light and joyful, full of intricate step combinations and patterns that seemed so easy on the eye of the beholder when performed correctly, they would never even consider that this what they jokingly called *Doom* behind everybody's back.

He can hear Jared move around the stage but he can't see him, not yet, but soon they'll both turn around and for the last minute and a half they'll be having a good view of what the other is doing, which is the part Jensen likes best. Jared on stage is a whole new being that can do the impossible. It's awesome to look at even if he's dancing himself.

When the last strikes of the cello ring through the theatre, they stand shoulder to shoulder and take in the applause that roles towards them; wave after wave, after wave. The spot lights are on full blast so they can't really see all that many people, but they don't have to see them to know they liked it. Jared grabs Jensen's hand and steps out to the side, ready to bow, never letting go of that hand. Jensen follows suit, taking his last bow on this stage as a student.

He'll be back for more though next year as a *soloist* with *NYCB*. The ink on his contract hasn't been dry all that long, but it's signed and he's excited. He's going to dance but he's also going to be in New York with Jared. And in the end that's exactly where he wants to be, where he belongs.

END

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