

## One

It began with the smallest thing, nothing seemingly great or earth shattering, it started, instead, with the tiniest of noises—a small click.

The sky was getting dark, there had been rain off and on all day—and now the late summer sun was setting, washing the world in color. “Red sky at night” was almost a daily guarantee at this time of year. Each day the same, yet so different, the light unique, the way the flowers danced in the wind and the calls of the birds in the trees. There were five hummingbirds who had drawn up battle lines in the garden and Jensen was sitting quietly, camera in hand, waiting to see if he could finally get a picture of one of them against the red sky. A drop of water hit his head, then another and still he stayed motionless with his lens trained on the hummingbird feeder.

“I am not letting you sit out there in the rain tonight,” Jeff said from the door.

“It’s not raining yet,” Jensen replied, looking up at the sky. He could see the dark veil of rain falling over the mountains. “Fine.” He took one last glance into the garden, and walked slowly into the house. By the time he reached the back porch, it started raining in earnest.

“You can’t sit out there all day,” Jeff said, taking the camera from him and gently pushing him towards one of the chairs at the kitchen table. “Even at this time of year.”

“It’s not that bad,” Jensen snapped, then sighed. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Jeff was fussing with the electric kettle, getting tea out of the cupboard and warming the teapot. When he’d first moved in, Jensen had teased him about the teapot. It was covered in red roses with matching cups and saucers. Now, tea was a daily ritual, when Jeff got home, he put on the kettle and rounded up Jensen from wherever he was, and they sat and talked about the day.

“What’s wrong?”

“I lost one,” Jeff said, setting the pot on the table and sitting across from Jensen.

“How?”

“Overdose, his roommate found him.”

“When?”

“About two. I went down to the ER, but he was too far gone,” Jeff said his voice tight.

“I’m sorry.”

“I knew it was coming, it’s just hard. I can’t help feeling it’s my fault.”

“You know it’s not,” Jensen said firmly. In addition to teaching full time at Commencement Bay University, Jeff was a practicing therapist—and he specialized in the “hard cases” no one else would take.

“I know.” Tears were tumbling down his face. “And I know most of them leave me well on the path to healing, but sometimes.”

“You’d like the perfect sunset with the orchestra playing?”

“Something like that.”

“Jeff . . .” Jensen reached across the table and grabbed Jeff’s hand firmly in his. “I’m still here.”

“You are.” Jeff squeezed his hand.

“And it was a close call with me.”

“It was—still is.”

“I know.” Jensen paused, about to say more, but the look on Jeff’s face stopped him. They’d known each other while Jensen was teaching at the university and had become friends one night when Jeff’s car had decided it wanted to overheat in a spectacular spray of steam and antifreeze. Jensen had offered him a ride, and after that, they fell into an easy friendship. It was hard not to like Jeff Morgan. He was open, honest, hard as nails, and cared for his friends and patients with a gentleness that still surprised Jensen.

It was when Jensen’s life had suddenly gone from idyllic to horrific that he discovered who his friends were—and there were fewer than he thought. Being the youngest full professor in Commencement Bay University’s history department was good and bad. People admired him, students clamored to get into his classes. Unfortunately, some of the older instructors at the university resented Jensen being promoted over them, and some of the students thought his age would make him a soft touch on grades. That was his downfall. He’d had a student that was continually failing, quiz after quiz, test after test and Jensen had asked to speak to him on several occasions. Not once did Kurtis make it to an appointment, and so when the semester ended Jensen did the only thing that was fair. He failed him. It was a required class for graduation and it meant Kurtis would have to try and take it again the next semester.

What happened next changed Jensen’s life forever.

It began when the chair of the department called at six in the morning—by eight Jensen was in the assistant Dean’s office and by noon he had been hauled in front of the president of the university—fired and arrested. Kurtis

claimed that Jensen had picked him up in one of the dives downtown and raped him. As soon as Kurtis came forward several other students, all friends of Kurtis, made similar claims. Jensen was still reeling, feeling like it wasn't real when Jeff came to bail him out. After the other man dropped him off at his apartment, Jensen had stood staring at the wall for what felt like days, the despair growing every second. His life was over. All he'd ever done, years of study, of working late and doing more had paid off in nothing. He still wasn't sure when he decided his life was really over, all he remembered was thinking about it, and then Jeff shouting his name. When he woke up four days later, Jeff was beside the bed in ICU.

The accusations and arrest sent more in motion than anyone knew—with the exception of Jeff. While Jensen was in ICU, the regular round of tests showed an anomaly. The staff waited until he was stable to run more tests and he was still in critical care when a long series of diagnostic testing began. Jensen was barely aware of it at first. As he slowly came back, he knew something was wrong. Jeff was there all the time. At one point he remembered asking him about classes and Jeff told him to not worry. He later found out Jeff cancelled classes for a week, so Jensen was never alone.

When he was finally moved to a regular room, six days after he'd been admitted, Jensen finally confessed to Jeff about the aches and pains that plagued him daily. He had been ignoring them, even though they had been getting steadily worse for several years. The excuses to not see a doctor were easy. It was damp—and he had broken his leg and arm when he was snowboarding in high school—there had been other injuries as well. What Jensen hadn't really noticed until Jeff was grilling him in the hospital was the fact he had slowly been doing less and less over the last year. He was driving to work on nice days instead of walking, taking shorter walks on the beaches and in the mountains and turned down a chance to teach in London for a semester. Each separately meant nothing. Jeff wrote them all down, and pulled out his laptop. He was fond of graphs and patterns and once he added in all the data, the pattern was clear. Jensen still didn't believe it.

Until the doctor appeared with a grim look on his face.

Jensen heard the words, the long, long words that gave the aches and pains, the unusual infections a name. Jeff put his hand over Jensen's halfway through the doctor's explanation, by the end, tears were tumbling down Jeff's face. Jensen felt oddly detached. It didn't feel real, and he was still waiting to wake up from a nightmare. The doctor talked about medications, palliative treatments, what to watch for and what might happen. It all just rattled around in Jensen's head without really becoming words. As far as he was concerned, nothing mattered anyway. There were still accusations of rape, no job and a possible trial coming up. Illness meant nothing.

They released Jensen nine days after he woke in ICU. Once he was out, he had no idea what he would do. Nothing had changed while he was in the hospital. The horror that started it all was still there. When he was wheeled out to the curb, Jeff's car was waiting—Jensen expected that. What he didn't expect were two large suitcases in his condo. Jeff, apparently, had no intention of leaving Jensen alone, and while he was in the hospital the other man had arranged to put his things in storage and moved in. Jensen was too apathetic to be angry—it was more a tired frustration. At least Jeff stepped in when the hospital wanted to send Jensen to counseling. As Jeff pointed out—they would have sent Jensen to him anyway, so it was ridiculous to avoid it his case, just because they knew each other. He later told Jensen that lying about a conflict of interests bothered him, but not enough to change his mind.

Once Jeff Morgan let you into his life, you were there, and he would do anything for those lucky enough to be called friend.

Three more days passed as Jensen stared listlessly out the window at the apartment wondering how it at all ended so quickly. He'd been hoping to get to Europe for some research that summer. His academic papers had been turned into popular pieces for several magazines, and two of his non-academic books on the Dark Ages had surprisingly turned out to be solid sellers. He'd proposed another book, and his publisher had readily agreed. "Popular" history was doing well for them, and Jensen was attracting many new readers.

Now, he was confined to the county. The walls of the apartment and the small balcony were all he had. Jeff had returned to teaching and seeing clients, but he called hourly. If Jensen didn't answer, Jeff would show up, if he couldn't make it and Jensen refused to answer calls and texts the EMTs would come by. Jensen finally gave up and answered the phone, even if it was to growl at his friend.

What he didn't know—what no one knew—was Jeff wasn't about to let Kurtis and his friends get away with what they'd done. Even though Jensen had sworn statements that he was nowhere near the bar in question on the dates in question, the university and police refused to listen. So, Jeff had called in a favor. One of Jensen's former students was managing editor of the largest alternative newsweekly in the Pacific Northwest, with circulation from the border with Canada all the way south to Portland, Oregon. A readership of more than 100,000 meant the paper was attracting star reporters from around the nation. One of them, Shannon Redford, was assigned to Jensen's story.

It was exactly two weeks after Jensen was released that the reporter called Jeff. She was at the apartment an hour after the call. Twenty minutes after that, Jeff's excited shout dragged Jensen's attention away from his bedroom

wall. Four days later the story was printed and everything changed again. Kurtis and his friends recanted in the light of the mass of information Shannon had collected, the case was dropped and the university was scrambling to defend themselves from the lawsuit they were sure Jensen would file. Jeff “let the bastards sweat” for another week before the university called offering to completely reinstate Jensen. When he refused, the offer of a settlement came so fast Jensen was sure they had been ready for a lawsuit. He later found out that in addition to everything else, Jeff had informed the president of the university that he would resign and take his practice elsewhere if they didn’t “suck it up and say they were stupid” as Jeff put it one night over dinner.

The settlement from the university, on top of his royalties and a deal he had worked out the year before with the publishing house of a bestselling horror writer to use his name and research in his *Devil’s Detectives* series, set Jensen up with enough money to buy a house and have a comfortable income. Of course, Jeff had taken over the bottom floor and insisted on paying rent, and so their life had settled into a routine over the last four years.

Jensen’s health had ups and downs. Some days he felt nearly normal, others he could barely make it out of bed. Pain was a continual backdrop in his life. Jeff started driving him everywhere. Even as his body was slowly failing, Jensen refused to really let what the doctors—many of them—were saying sink in. He took up photography, something he had fallen in love with in school—he even had an actual dark room, though he tended to use his digital cameras more often. Sometimes he did enjoy the process of developing the film. Those pictures felt more “real” to him. At Jeff’s urging he had started posting his photos on an art site, theartistscave.com. After his first post, he had discovered the joy of sharing his photos and talking about art and photography with people from around the world.

“I’m going to an open mic tonight, do you want to come?” Jeff’s voice snapped Jensen back to the present.

“No, I got a couple of good pictures I want to upload, and I did promise *Dark Ages Now* that article on the plague.”

“Plagues and pictures, sounds like a new emo band.” Jeff said, punching him gently on the shoulder.

“It does. Maybe I’ll trademark it and sell it to the highest bidder,” Jensen replied with a laugh.

“You should!”

When Jeff left an hour later, Jensen headed into his office and uploaded the picture he’d taken that morning of a spider—looking like it was glowing on the center of its web and the web looking like it was floating on air. He was happy with the way it turned out and uploaded it onto The Artists’ Cave.

He was just about to open his word processing program when the little antelope that designated a favorite on the site appeared in the corner of his profile. Curious, he went to look at the comment. After reading what was there, he needed to know more and clicked on the name of the person who left the it—Pike65.

## Two

The rain was spattering against the window with enough force that the noise overpowered the music on the stereo. The day had started out bright and sunny, but it had quickly fallen into what Seattle weathermen insisted on calling a “partially cloudy” day. The wind had picked up too, making sitting on the balcony impossible. One of the disadvantages to living in the penthouse—it was usually at least a little windy. Jared sighed as he looked out over the city. Sometimes he wished things were different and he could go exploring the way he had *before*, but he still couldn’t get out of the apartment.

There was a soft tap on the front door before it opened. “I have all the goods,” Charlie said, walking in the door, his arms full of bags. He set them down, went back out and brought in another armful.

“Thanks.” Jared waited until Charlie closed the door and locked it before walking over to help carry things into the kitchen.

“They had that raisin bread you like, so I got some, even though it wasn’t on the list. I hope that’s okay?” Charlie said as he started unpacking the bags.

“I’ve told you before, anything like that is okay,” Jared assured him.

“It’s why I get the big bucks,” he said with a laugh. “I can find anything.”

“You can.” Jared realized he was standing with his back against the refrigerator.

Charlie looked at him and smiled. “I’ll be back on Wednesday with the usual. If you need anything else email or text okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Charlie led the way out of the kitchen to the front door. He unlocked it and stepped out. “See you on Wednesday. I might be a little early, I have tickets to the game.”

“Sure, just text, so I know it’s you.”

“Yep,” he said and left, closing the door carefully behind him. Jared heard Charlie’s keys in the lock on the outer door.

Jared managed to make it to a count of ten before the frantic urge to lock the door propelled him across the room and he closed all ten locks, making sure each was secure. His hands were shaking when he finished. He closed his eyes and did the deep breathing his therapist recommended. It *was* getting better, he reminded himself. There had been a time when Charlie had to leave everything in a box between the outer and inner doors of the condo. That had moved on to Jared meeting him at the door, sliding everything inside and slamming the door closed. When he’d finally let Charlie in, it had been one of the hardest days since *The Day It Happened*.

As he walked back into the kitchen to unpack his groceries, he concentrated on not looking over his shoulder. He knew the doors were locked, no one could get to the glass doors on the balcony since he was at the top of a tall building. It was one of the reasons he kept the condo. The elevator was keyed for each floor, so only he had keys to the top floor, there was an outer, metal door with a small entryway that had coat hooks and an umbrella rack, as well as a box for Charlie to leave things in, and then an inner door made of heavy wood. Jared had the locks installed before he moved in, while he was still recovering in the hospital. Luckily, he’d found the place before *The Day It Happened*, so he knew he had someplace safe to go to after the hospital. Even then, it took almost a year for him to even venture farther than placing both feet on the balcony.

Once everything was in its place, he wandered into his office. Deadline for the next book was looming, but he really wasn’t in the mood to write. He knew he should, but there was an unfinished sketch he’d started the day before. A crow had perched on the balcony for all the world like a model posing for him. He’d never imagined that a sketch would take him away from writing, but while he’d been recovering, a PT had recommended drawing as part of his physical therapy. At first his work looked like a child’s drawing, but now he was proud enough of most of them to post them on [theartistscave.com](http://theartistscave.com). That first posting had been traumatic and he’d done it while his psychotherapist was there, but he could hide behind the anonymity of a screen name. There was no way to track that artist back to him.

He stared at the computer for a long moment, then picked up the sketch and walked back to his drawing table by the window. The book could wait a day or two. It was getting close to the anniversary of *The Day It Happened* and there had been several “where is he now” stories up already. He had to admit, the one claiming he’d been spotted in a log cabin high in the Rockies had been almost as amusing as one blogger’s claim that he was researching a book—and living in Antarctica. The longer he was out of the public eye, the wilder the claims got. He didn’t care; and his publisher seemed to enjoy encouraging them, giving him an “air of mystery” as his agent put it.

He couldn’t believe it had been four years. Sometimes he dreamed about it, and for days after it would feel like it had just happened. He would withdraw. Charlie wasn’t allowed in. If it was *really* bad he wouldn’t call his therapist, he would resort to emailing, removing himself one step further from contact and potential harm. He knew,

objectively, he was safe in his home, but the subjective self still got the upper-hand now and then and the Day would come slamming back with all the pain and terror when it had happened.

Jared leaned back and looked out the window and let himself think about The Day It Happened, trying to keep himself in the role of observer, the way his therapist taught him. He could see the car waiting at the airport to take him to HorrorTrifectaCon. His assistant for the con, Joseph, drove an '80s Geo and folding his frame into the tiny car was a bit of a trick, but he managed. By the time they were at the hotel, he had convinced Joseph to call him Jared. They were going to be spending a lot of time together over the next four days, and he wasn't sure he could take all the "sirs" that Joseph kept using. Jared was the Top Guest of Honor that year, his *Devil's Detectives* series and his *Fallen* books were all crowding the top of the bestsellers' lists and he had been crowned "Commander of the Order of Horror" at another convention the year before. Getting top spot at HorrorTrifectaCon, the biggest, most important convention for the genre, was an honor he'd dreamed about as he refined his first book. He never thought he'd make it, but here he was, and walking into the hotel that year not as a panelist, or a guest but as *the* guest was an amazing feeling.

As he was checking in, the front desk manager handed him several letters that had been delivered to the hotel. Jared frowned as he opened the first, it was an invitation to a private party of the other guests and panelists. The second was his schedule for the weekend, with a rundown of panels he was sharing and who they were. He groaned when he Erik Henrikson on one of the panels. The man disliked him, and Jared returned the feeling with vigor. They had been on panels before Jared's work got popular and Henrikson was the top dog. Things changed when the first of the *Devil's Detectives* novels was picked up for a TV movie. After that, the books really took off and the release of book five had people lining up outside bookstores for a midnight release. Henrikson resented Jared for all of that and more.

Even though he was annoyed by the panel, Jared's mood was still good. Then he opened the third envelope. It was a line from his latest novel. "*We are waiting, we are watching and thirteen bloody marks shall mark the fall.*" It was written in dark red ink. He'd received strange letters before, but for some reason, this one chilled him to the bone. Joseph asked what was wrong and Jared handed him the note. The front desk clerk checked him in and by the time Jared turned around, Joseph had a beefy security guard and a member of ConCom standing with him. They were all taking the note very seriously, and before Jared had time to protest, he had a bodyguard as well as Joseph trailing behind him.

They dropped him off at his room, after the bodyguard checked it carefully, then told him they would be back for the meet and greet. Things went smoothly for the next two days, with the exception of the panel with Henrikson, but, honestly, Jared had so much fun baiting the man, it left him in a good mood after the panel. No further threat had appeared and ConCom was beginning to think that it was a hoax. Joseph and the bodyguard still trailed after him most of the time, but by Saturday night things were lax. Jared had headed to the one of the room parties dedicated to his books, and was tired but happy as he left to return to his room. He spotted Joseph leaving the party just as he turned to corner to the elevators.

The next few moments changed his life forever.

The man attacked from behind the soda machine. All Jared remembered was the flash of a knife, the ragged voice counting with each strike of the blade and pain cutting into him again and again. He managed to block one blow to his face, screaming for someone to help, and the man drove the knife straight for his chest. Jared got his hand between his body and the knife, his right hand taking most of the blow, so the knife missed his heart. Someone was shouting, there were noises all around him, but Jared was falling, his whole world swallowed by the sound of his own heart beating, trying to keep going despite the wounds that covered his body. The last thing he remembered was someone saying to leave the knife for the professionals.

He woke up four days later in ICU.

It was a long recovery. He had to wait two weeks before he could be transported to Seattle, and it was another week before he was allowed home with a private nurse. It was shortly after he got home that the panic attacks began. A month and a half after the attack, he wasn't able to set foot out of his condo, and he'd been there since. No one came in but Charlie and his therapists. The only time he ever left was to go to the doctor for a check-up and that had to be planned for in advance. The panic was so bad, he practically had to be sedated to get him to leave. He was trying to work through it. He missed the person he once was—open and friendly. One of his college friends had compared him to a happy puppy. Smiling all the time, and always ready to join in. Now he was a recluse. He lived in fear behind locks and solid doors. A silent, empty prison of his own making. Four years and he still couldn't escape, he still couldn't even bear to get calls from people he didn't know. He only called his agent, Charlie, and the therapist. His doctors left messages on his machine because they insisted on calling from blocked numbers and he wouldn't pick up the phone. The biggest problem was it was getting worse not better.

Jared sighed and looked down at the picture he'd been sketching. A small smile crossed his face. The crow came by almost every day. Jared had taken to leaving a plate of cat kibble on the balcony and the crow seemed to enjoy it. The bird was as close to a friend as he had these days. Jared wondered why it had taken him this long to sketch him, but it didn't matter, he had, and he thought he'd done a pretty good job. After adding a few finishing touches to the picture, he carried it to his scanner to upload to The Artists' Cave.

While he was waiting for the scanner to finish he logged onto the site and looked at the latest postings. One caught his eye. A spider, looking like it was glowing, hanging from an impossible web with no support. It was a photograph, but he assumed it had been photoshopped. He clicked on the image and went to look at the data. It was a raw photo, no touchups, all the camera information was there beside the picture. There was something about it that captured his imagination. It was creepy and beautiful at the same time. He favorited it and left a comment, ending with several exclamation marks and a smiley face. After checking the artist's screen name "TackyMerlin" he got back to uploading his sketch. He had finished and was back looking through TackyMerlin's gallery when the little antelope that indicated a favorite popped up. Jared checked, and it was on a drawing he'd done the week before. A sketch of the light and shadow on the building across the street. Reading the comment brought a smile to his face. He did a double take when he noticed the favorite and the comment were from TackyMerlin.

Jared stared at the words under his sketch for a long time. He started to answer it more than once. After the fourth time, he wrote "thank you" in the box under the comment, then clicked the icon for a message to the artist. It was one of the scariest things he done in years, but something about TackyMerlin's portfolio had moved him and he wanted to let him know.

### Three

The rain that had started the day before had settled stayed. The morning was softly gray, the patter of drops on the glass of the morning nook comforting as Jensen had a cup of coffee, watching swallows zipping over the small lake on the property. He could hear Jeff getting breakfast ready. Jensen had long since learned that offering to help was pointless. Jeff was a sweet, kind and gentle man—unless he was cooking—then he turned into something like a grizzly bear crossed with a rabid wolverine. It was just best to stay clear of it all.

Jensen chuckled. It was just fine Jeff prepared all the meals—Jensen was a terrible cook and had survived on take-out and restaurants since grad school. He was pretty sure he was the only college graduate in America that couldn't even cook ramen noodles or macaroni and cheese from the box. He'd tried once, right after Jeff moved in, because the other man had been working late. Jensen followed the directions on the mac and cheese box to the letter. He had no idea how following the directions could end up that disastrously wrong. He had stared at the strange colored noodles for a few minutes, then picked up the phone and ordered pizza. Jeff still teased him about it.

"Here you go," Jeff said, setting a plate of pancakes down in front of him. "They had berries at the farmer's market, so those are real blueberries—not those weird *things* you like."

"I only call them blueberry muffins because that's what it says on the box. I never claimed they were even close to the real thing."

"I have no idea how you can even eat those things."

"Comfort food."

"Artificially flavored blueberry yuck?" Jeff asked with disgust.

"My grandmother made them," Jensen answered, cutting into the blueberry pancakes and taking a bite. "These are good."

"As good as yuck?"

"I told you, and you of all people should know, taste is associative. Grandma made those fake blueberry muffins for breakfast, with three extra eggs in them so they were more like soufflés than muffins. I have no idea why she did, she was a great cook, but she used all kinds of premade mixes. I asked Grandpa about it once and he said it was because they had to make everything from scratch for so long Grandma lost her mind and now only bought mixes." He laughed remembering his grandfather's face. "And going to my grandparent's house was one of the most awesome things about summer when I was a kid."

"Fine, I just don't know why you make me cook them for you."

"Because the last time I did, I caught the oven on fire."

"You're a waste of space in the kitchen, Jensen," Jeff said with a smile.

"I'm good for handing you things."

"Only sometimes."

"You said cup." Jensen took a sip of coffee.

"I said teaspoon. Why would I want a *cup* of salt in cookies?"

"I don't know, maybe they were saltwater cookies like saltwater taffy?"

"You are really hopeless in the kitchen."

"I never denied that," Jensen said, laughing.

"I just don't understand how someone who is so good at so many other things, can suck so bad at something as simple as food."

"It's not simple. Stoves hate me, electric, gas, camp—they all have it in for me."

"Cursed by the wicked witch of cooking appliances?"

"Definitely."

"What are you doing today?" Jeff always asked. "Your doctor's appointment was changed, right?"

"Yeah, it's on Friday at four. Babs wanted to get me in earlier, but I said you had to come because I don't drive anymore." Jensen looked out at the rain. "I think I'll develop the roll of film I took a couple of weeks ago and finish that article for *Dark Ages Now* before their editor's head explodes."

"What's the hold-up?" Jeff frowned at him. "Are you okay?"

"I promised I would always tell you when I wasn't, Jeff, so stop looking like that. I just have a hard time sugar-coating things and they prefer it to be all lovely and clean."

"You might be too picky."

"Probably."

"I'm doing a blind eval for a friend, one of his patients is not responding as expected and he wanted me to look over the notes."

“Blind eval?” Jensen asked.

“Oh! Yeah, I look at the notes—no name, no gender, no age, just a really basic explanation of what’s happening.”

“That sounds... different.”

“It is, we are looking at the variety of the therapist experience within the...” Jeff trailed off with a smile.

Realization hit Jensen and he grinned. “Do I smell a paper?”

“Maybe, maybe even a book, but we don’t want to jinx it, do we?”

“Nope. When are you going to be home?”

“After six.”

“Want me to order take-out and you can just stop and get it on the way home?”

“Sounds good.” Jeff stood. “I hate to eat and run, but I have a student coming in before class.”

“Don’t you hate it when they make you actually work during office hours?” Jensen handed Jeff his plate.

“Yeah, the little bastards.” Jeff clapped him on the back. “If you leave, give me a call.”

“I always do.”

“I know.” It was their standard farewell. Jeff carried the plates into the kitchen and a few minutes later Jensen heard the garage door open and Jeff’s car drove past the house.

Jensen leaned back in his chair and sipped his coffee. He really didn’t want to work on the article today, but if he got it done, it wouldn’t be haunting him every time he walked into his office. He’d even taking to avoiding his business email. *Just do it*, he told himself firmly. Getting it out of the way would also let him enjoy his time in the darkroom without the specter of the article hanging over his head. The weather was cooperating, at least he wouldn’t spend the time in his office looking out at a sunlit garden.

He finished his coffee, took one last look out at a large group of ducks floating serenely on the lake and stood. The dizziness hit him so fast he didn’t have time to react and was on the floor before he really realized what was happening. He blinked up at the glass ceiling of the breakfast nook, a little dazed from the fall. It was the third time in five days he’d almost blacked out, luckily the other two times he’d been in the bedroom and managed to fall back onto the bed, not on the floor. Jeff would have noticed. Although, Jensen suspected Jeff knew there was something wrong. Unfortunately, this time his head had hit the edge of the table as he fell. There would be a bruise and that meant the days of hiding it were over.

Jensen rolled over and, using a chair for support, pulled himself erect. He waited as the dizziness and nausea subsided then took his coffee cup into the kitchen and put it in the sink. The dishwasher needed to be loaded, and he opened the door—then stopped. He could find a million things to keep him from finishing the article and he might as well just face it. The dishes would wait.

He opened the window in the office to let the scent of the wet garden into the room. The lilies were always more fragrant when it was cool and wet. The salvia in the little plot under the window added a spicy undertone to the rich scent of the lilies and roses. He loved the roses. They had been there when they moved in. The plants had ancient stalks with thorns so strong that they hadn’t bothered with an alarm on the window closest to the big bush. Any would-be thief who tried to get into the house that way would be a bloody mess before he could get to the window.

Jensen had left the article open, so when he woke the computer, it was there, staring him at the face. Sighing, he read through the first half, so he could get back into the rhythm of the article and started writing. He was surprised when Jeff’s noontime text rang through his phone. Jensen grabbed it without thinking and texted back a quick “All’s okay” then kept writing, not wanting to break his concentration. He was so close to finished. When his phone rang, he answered it with a growl.

“Are you okay?” Jeff’s voice sounded worried.

“Yeah,” Jensen answered quickly. “Just like the text.”

“When was the last time you answered my first text?”

“What?”

“You never answer the first time, Jensen. Are you okay?”

“I didn’t even think about it.” Jensen wondered why Jeff sounded so freaked. “I was in the middle of the Black Death and I didn’t want to lose track.”

“Oh, thank God,” Jeff said with a sigh. “I understand. I’ll let you go.”

“Jeff?” Jensen said before he could stop himself.

“What?”

“I fell in the breakfast nook.”

“WHAT?”

“You’ll see the bruise on my face, so ...” he broke off.



“The bruise? How hard did you fall?”

“I just got dizzy.”

“How many times, Jensen?”

“Three counting this morning.”

“We were going to mention it when?” Jeff’s voice was tight with anger and worry.

“Before the doctor? Since you’d hear it then anyway?”

“I knew it, I knew it.” Jeff muttered. “Don’t forget to order dinner.”

“I’m sorry,” Jensen said quietly.

“It’s okay. We’ll talk when I get home. Get some rest if you can,” Jeff said gently. “Maybe you should stay out of the darkroom, though, the cell reception in there sucks.”

“But I wanted to develop...”

“Humor me on this, okay?”

“Yeah, okay, see you tonight.” Jensen broke the connection and stared at the phone. Jeff was furious, he could hear it in the soft, gentle tones as clearly as if Jeff had been screaming. And, if Jensen was completely honest with himself, Jeff had every right to be angry. He should have told him the first time it happened. They had no idea about how things progressed with this illness. The pain was a constant, slowly getting worse, filling his everyday life with a continual buzz of discomfort. Other things happened along the way. Neuropathy in his hands, issues with his digestion, migraines and now it seemed like something new every week anymore. Jensen’s doctor kept calling him “the Perfect Storm” because of the way things were happening. Still holding the phone, he made a silent promise to never skip over things like that again. Jeff would find out anyway, and the fallout would be easier if he knew upfront.

Jensen set his phone down and finished the article. An hour later, he’d finished his edits and sent it off to the magazine. It was a relief to see it go. He still had several projects to do, but that was the most pressing and now that it was gone he felt better about opening his photo file on the computer and scrolling through his pictures to see if there was something new he wanted to post on The Artists’ Cave.

There were several he’d taken the weekend before when Jeff had decided they needed to go to Seattle. Jensen enjoyed Jeff’s random excursions. One week it had been to Portland for Voodoo Doughnuts, once into Eastern Washington for “the best steak and cheesecake ever.” It gave Jensen a chance to use his camera. Jeff was an enthusiastic tourist and had to look at everything, no matter where they were, no matter how many times they’d been there. He’d just located the last one from a favorite stop on their trips and was considering uploading it.

He opened the site and logged in. There was a message notification flashing in the center of the screen. He frowned at it for a second and clicked on it.

*Hey, I was just going through your gallery, I have to say, it’s amazing. That shot of the 11<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge in Tacoma is ... well amazing! How you managed to capture the sense of organic and growing in that picture, I have no idea. I looked at it once and sort of thought of that, but I thought I was the only one. And that spider in the sand? Wow, just ... wow. I hope you don’t mind, but I am trying to sketch it. The light is so tricky, getting the spider and the sand just so. I started putting comments on all the photos—and I will finish—but I had to drop you a note! – Pike65*

Jensen started at the note for a long time. The night before, after going through Pike65’s gallery, he’d been tempted to send a message. He wrote several out and deleted them before finally going to bed. Now he wished he’d sent one. Sometimes he still found himself worrying about his notoriety. When Kurtis had accused him, his name had been splashed everywhere the media reached. When Kurtis recanted, the news agencies weren’t as excited, and the story wasn’t big enough “news”—not even when the others stepped forward and admitted they lied as well. Jensen took great pains to remain completely anonymous online and so far, it worked. Still, every time, he had to think about how he was going to handle something.

Taking a deep breath, he hit reply, then sat with his fingers hovering over the keyboard for a minute. After staring at the blank space, he opened a second browser window and went to Pike65’s gallery. He looked through several pages of sketches, then closed the window. He started typing.

## Four

It was a dark morning. The rain was crouching over the city like a giant creature, blotting out the sun, filling the air with cold wind-driven rain. It was more like a winter day than summer. Days like this had once led to walks on the beach. Jared loved the way the usually quiet Sound would be whipped into a frenzy by the wind, huge waves would crash against the breakwater and send spray into the wind with a sound like a waterfall. The world always seemed a little more alive on days like that—not people, they hid from the weather—but the world itself. Sometimes Jared thought it rejoiced in the violence it could produce, showing the fierceness, then offering the solace of the quiet after the storm. The idea had been with him his whole life. When he was in grad school, he had taken the idea and run it to the extreme, producing his first novel. It was a strange piece, Expressionistic and generally took more time to explain than for a reader to finish. It had been published by the university, but he was sure there only were seven copies in the world, four at the college, one on his shelf and one each on his parents' shelves.

His second novel was written on a bet. His roommate challenged him to write a novel in a weekend. Jared had said something while they were at the local pub on Thursday. Remembering it now, he wasn't sure exactly what had been said, but he knew it had involved the news editor for the paper missing deadlines. His roommate—the news editor—had laid down the challenge. One newspaper on deadline and one complete novel on any topic but “that Expressionist shit”. The bet was on—and the *Devil's Detectives* were born. Jared skipped little things like eating and sleeping and at the end of the weekend had a finished novel in his hands. His roommate hadn't fared as well, the paper was still half done.

Once the novel was finished, Jared took time to read it over. It wasn't half bad. He edited it, handed it over to a friend to go through again and after writing the incredibly painful and awkward query letter, he sent it off to several different people. He was surprised when an agent responded two weeks later. He wanted the book, and he knew just where to take it. Jared signed the contract and was shocked when, a year and a half later, his first novel was sitting on the bestsellers' list. He still had that first list, clipped from a newspaper framed on the wall. He also kept the first reviews, some good, some bad, but all for his book he'd written on a bet.

There were six novels in that series now and four in his *Fallen* books. As the books became more popular he started getting invited to conventions. First as a panelist, then a guest, then up to Guest of Honor. He had been happily riding the crest of the GOH when his world came to a screeching halt. After the attack, he discovered he could still write. In fact, the sixth book in the *Devil's Detectives* was his best reviewed to date. The fourth *Fallen* had debuted at number one. He could pour all his fear, his terror and his pain into those books and it came across as sharp, cutting and terrifying. Someday he wanted to try his hand at something else, but for now, what he could produce was dark. It was violent, and it was unrelenting. The darker it got, the more popular the books. Sometimes he found himself wondering about that. The *why* people found books like that so fascinating. Was it because the books fulfilled a need they didn't want to admit to having? Did it give them peace that those things didn't really exist? That they were just scary stories, like kids told around a campfire? It was something he pondered more than once in his anonymous blog. No one read it, he was mostly talking to himself and, so, he let his words wander.

Jared carried his coffee into the office. He needed to finish book five in *Fallen*. The last three days had produced four paragraphs, which was frustrating when he could usually turn out a chapter a day. He wasn't sure what the problem was, and when things like that happened he let the characters stew for a day or two. Usually they came back guns blazing, and he would more than make up for lost time. He did take time to read over the chapter he was working on, he always did, to make sure the rhythm of the writer remained the same throughout the book. Usually the first chapter would need the most work in editing, because he was still feeling out the story. It was easier with characters he was familiar with, but even they produced days that were mostly made up of write, erase, write, erase and finally give up. Jared had a feeling it was one of those days.

After poking at the story for an hour, he got up and made himself another cup of coffee. Opening the refrigerator, he stared in hoping the milk might have some inspiration. It was no help, neither were the eggs or the bottle of orange juice. There was also nothing that looked good to eat right then. One thing The Day It Happened had done was turn him into a cook. He'd never cooked before. He lived off take out, restaurant and hotel food. Now, ordering something meant a stranger at the door. He couldn't bear that thought, so he learned to make his favorite foods. It turned out to be therapeutic as well. It was a tangible way to take care of himself. Right now, nothing looked good, so he just grabbed a cookie, coffee and headed back to his office.

The story was still where he left it. The characters hadn't decided to write it for him, although when he was “on” it felt more like he was taking dictation than writing. Today wasn't one of those days. He opened his browser and checked his blog. No comments. The site counter showed that there had been nearly a hundred people stopping on the page, but none of them ever said anything. He wondered who they were and if they were actually reading it. It didn't really make a difference. He would keep writing it. It was mostly thinking out loud, and it was better than

talking to himself. He wasn't really in the mood to blog either. So, after promising himself he would get back to work on his book in an hour, he opened The Artists' Cave.

There was a message.

Jared stared at the little notepad icon. No one ever messaged him. They left comments, but no one messaged. He felt his heart starting to hammer in his chest as the panic reaction started. Why would someone message him? Who were they? What did they want? His hand started shaking. He was almost ready to run when he noticed it was a reply. A reply? Then he remembered the note he'd sent the day before. Taking several long, slow breaths, in the nose and out through his mouth, he tried to calm the reaction. It took five minutes, but he felt like he had things under control enough to open the note. After all, he started the conversation.

*Hey, thanks for the comments! I love seeing the organic in manmade structures. Sometimes something will strike me with the feeling it grew there, not that it was built. I am not sure what the difference is, but sometimes it's there, you know? I can't believe you are sketching the sand spider! I am speechless. It's such an honor, you have so much talent and it was just a lucky shot. Although, to be honest, most of the really good shots are pure luck. I've been trying to get a picture of this hummingbird that rules the backyard, but he refuses to pose on a branch at sunset. It's like the little brat knows I'm there trying to get a picture and he's sticking his very long tongue out at me! I'm not kidding. I got a picture of THAT, but not him and the sunset. I can't think of a way to bribe him either. Hummingbirds are above bribery, I think.*

*I've been going through your gallery. Your stuff is just stunning. You GET things, the real soul of them in your drawing and it's only a few lines sometimes, I think that's what fascinates me so much, it's like you can see the soul of what it's supposed to be and you sketch that. The drawing you did of the otter was perfect. There was so much there and it was only a few lines. It's really amazing. I'm going through your gallery too, adding comments, but I noticed I am mostly saying "awesome" and "amazing" because if I don't limit myself I will end up writing a long dissertation comparing it to some obscure artist and that never goes well. Trust me on this. LOL!*

*I'm tossing up a few photographs here in a minute. I'm trying to do a series of the same spot over the course of a year. I think it's coming along well, although the weather last fall cheated me out of photo of the trees in their autumn colors. We had a windstorm and they were all gone before I was there. I am hoping to get a few this year, but with the weather lately, who knows?*

*Looking forward to chatting soon—Merlin*

Jared reread the message, trying to picture the writer. He went back to TackyMerlin's gallery, and sure enough, there were a few new pictures. They were all of a path through the woods, the path was well used, and hazel trees created a natural arch at the far edge of the picture. The first two were winter, one with bare branches and the other with snow covering the ground, the third was early spring, the trees just starting to bud and the ferns alongside the path the bright green they turned when the first hint of warmth arrived. The fourth was early summer, judging by the berry bushes. They were all the same, and all different. As he looked at them, an idea started to form. He flicked through a few more photos, then went back to the ones of the path, a story unwinding in his head. Jared tried to shake it off. The next *Fallen* book was due soon.

He went back to the book he was working on and stared at it, the picture of the hazel-covered path still in his head. After contemplating the computer screen for a long moment, he made a deal with himself. If he finished the chapter he was working on, he could write the story that the pictures had started. Taking a sip of coffee, he started typing. The first words were slow, awkward, but then his characters came through for him. He was writing at a fast clip, only stopping long enough to get something to drink, then back to the story before the words ran out. When he finally stopped, he could hear the clock chiming in the living room—four o'clock. It had been a long time since he'd had a run like that while writing. And the best part was he could feel the words of the other story still there, waiting to be told.

His stomach growled, reminding him he'd skipped breakfast and he should have something to eat. He gathered up his coffee cup and empty soda cans then headed into the kitchen. This time when he opened the fridge, there was inspiration and in a few minutes, he had food on the stove. As he stirred the frying potatoes, he let his mind drift back to those pictures of the path. The things that might live there, and for the first time in a very long time, the things he saw were not all dark, not all terrifying. Yes, there were some of those things there, but there was light there too, and the light more than made up for the dark.

Jared set the table and sat down to eat. It was one of his rituals. It didn't matter that he always ate alone. He always set the table and ate there. The only time he allowed himself to eat on the couch were nights when there was a game on, and pizza was okay. It was strange, before *The Day It Happened* he never ate at the table at home. Of

course, he was rarely home. Now he wondered why, food tasted better when you took time to enjoy it, and it was easier to enjoy it at the table. When he finished, he rinsed his dishes and put them in the dishwasher.

It was almost six by the time he got back to the computer. He opened theartistscave.com and looked at the pictures again. He really wanted to see more, but this was a start. He could see the story there, the lines of the photograph becoming words. Characters stepped onto the path, waiting for him to begin. There was a smile on his face as he started writing. He could see his reflection in the window across from where he was sitting. It had been a long time since he'd smiled like that. Shoving that distracting thought aside, he kept going, the words flowing onto the page without effort. As he wrote, he realized there was more than one short chapter to tell, there was a whole world waiting for him to write. The thought was exciting and terrifying. New things were often terrifying, but there had been a time when he jumped into things without thinking. For some reason TackyMerlin's pictures inspired him to take a leap.

The first chapter was done. He turned back to The Artists' Cave and opened a message to TackyMerlin. After debating with himself for a moment, he pasted the chapter into the note.

## Five

The rain lasted all day. Jensen had hoped it would break long enough so he could get outside for a while, but there hadn't been a chance. In fact, the one time he opened the door and stepped onto the back porch to get the mail the rain had increased so it was pouring down, the water shooting out of the downspouts looking like fountains. He didn't usually mind the rain, but he wasn't feeling well, the ever-present hum of discomfort becoming something more akin to actual pain. He debated taking something for it, the prescription was getting harder and harder to fill, but sometimes it was hard to think with the pain throbbing through his body. He made a cup of coffee and took a pain pill.

As the day wore on, even as he finished his article, he could feel something building. He wasn't sure what it was, but his head ached from where he'd hit it on the table and there was a bump as well as a bruise. By the time he called the Thai place with his order, he was on the couch with his tablet, listening to a show on one of the history channels. It was mostly for noise in the background, he really didn't like being alone when he didn't feel good. One of his guilty pleasures was the series on the "real" history of places around the world. The "real" history varied from episode to episode. The one he was currently listening to was about how survivors of Atlantis founded the Mayan empire.

While he listened, he was surfing on his tablet. He'd run through his lives on the games he played—another guilty pleasure—and had moved on to reading blogs. Every now and then, one of the regular blogs he read would have a reblog or a guest blogger, and it was always interesting to see what they had to say. His taste was eclectic. He liked everything from history, both good and bad, to literary reviews and everything in between. When he got around to one of his favorites, he noticed it was a reblog. It was an interesting read on the idea of the allegory of the soul in western literature. He read it quickly, then went back and read it again, letting the writer's viewpoint sink in. It was the kind of thing that would have him thinking for days. He knew he had at least three of the books the writer mentioned. It wasn't until he reached the end of the blog for a third time that he looked at the author's name—and stopped and stared.

Pike65.

It couldn't be the same person. He clicked on the name, and it went to the original blog and there was a link to "my art on theartistscave.com". Jensen stared at the blog. Whoever he was, Pike65 was a regular blogger. There was a huge list of blogs, at least three a week, sometimes more judging by the calendar. He also had a wide selection of topics. Jensen looked at the list of tags and chose one at random and started reading.

"Have you been there all day?"

"What?" Jensen looked up from the tablet. Jeff was standing in the entry with take-out bags in his hand.

"Have you been on the couch all day?" Jeff asked again, his tone worried.

"No, I finished that stupid article and some other stuff, then sat down about an hour or so ago."

"You're not sure?"

"Not really, I was listening to the TV and was totally not playing stupid games on my tablet and lost track of the time."

Jeff laughed. "Not playing games does take up a lot of time."

"It does." Jensen set down the tablet and got up, blinking as the dizziness from earlier returned. He managed to stay on his feet, pain buzzing through his body.

"Jensen?"

"I'm okay." He opened his eyes and smiled. "That food smells good."

"We should eat before the noodles become a huge lump of goo." Jeff carried the food into the kitchen

"I didn't put the dishes in, I was trying to avoid distractions, so I would get that stupid article done."

"No problem," Jeff said, grabbing plates out of the cupboard. He set them on the table, frowned and looked up at Jensen. "How hard did you fall?" he asked, stepping to where Jensen was standing.

"I told you."

"You said there might be a bruise. This," he gently poked at Jensen's head, "is not a bruise. It is a bump with blood on it."

"I didn't bleed."

"You did. You mean ..." Jeff's eyes widened. "You didn't notice the blood?"

"I wasn't bleeding," Jensen said.

"Yes, you were, there's blood on the floor." He pointed at the dark spots on the tile. "You don't remember bleeding?"

Jensen couldn't take his eyes off the blood. He remembered the fall. He remembered looking up through the glass ceiling, then he went into his office. His hand strayed to the bump on his head. He could feel the crust of blood in his hairline.

"Did you bandage it? Heads bleed a lot."

"I ... I don't know." Jensen sank down into one of the chairs, trying to remember. There was a tiny wisp of memory of being in the bathroom with a wash cloth and thinking Jeff would be mad, but he'd thought it was a dream. He nodded off now and then and when he woke, the dreams always felt like they'd been real, so he wasn't always sure what was what anymore. He really didn't want to dump that on Jeff as well.

Jeff gently prodded his head and peered in his eyes. "Okay, let's eat before we have lumps of rice noodles." He served them both, then sat down opposite Jensen. "Sue sent along that rice dessert you like, the one that's sweet enough to take out your hummingbirds."

"I doubt that," Jensen said with a relieved chuckle. Jeff wasn't going to grill him—or at least planned to wait until after dinner. "How did your eval thing go?"

"I'm not sure. It's kind of strange not knowing the whole story. But, in a way, it was, hmm, freeing? Yeah, maybe that's the word. Because I could look at this person, not knowing gender, age—just the few points that were shared and they are so anonymous that I could be reading an eval on someone I actually knew and not recognize it. I'm not sure it's as valuable a tool as we were thinking going in. That's the problem with things like this, it is so much based on the person. What works for John Doe does not work for Joe. Our responses are built on a lifetime of experience, not just one or two events." Jeff stopped and stared out the window.

"What is it?" Jensen asked gently. He could tell something was bothering his friend.

"This eval—I wish there was some way for me to talk to whoever the person is—I will say he for the sake of conversation—but he has become a recluse because of what his therapist identifies as a traumatic event. Of course, I have no details. Did his spouse die? Was he in Iraq or Afghanistan? I don't know and it's frustrating. The thing is, these are the cases I handle best, and I want to call and find out more, but... It could even be someone in my department and I would never know." He slammed his hand down on the table with enough force to rattle the dishes. "And damn all, Jensen, I think I could help him."

"Oh?" Jensen said.

"I just have this feeling, you know?"

"I thought you said it was anonymous?"

"It is." Jeff sighed. "I just have this feeling I can't shake."

"Like Scotty?" Jensen asked, remembering the tall man. He had eyes that were light blue and his hair was closer to white than blond. Scotty had been one of Jeff's toughest cases. When Jeff was working with him, he always came home shattered. Everyone said it was a lost cause. Jeff didn't give up, and Scotty made it through. Jensen met the man when he came by the house one day with a gift for Jeff. While they waited, Scotty told Jensen his story. He'd been a mechanic, building custom motorcycles when his National Guard unit was called up. Three days after he landed an IED took out half his unit—and Scotty's left leg and half of his hand. His life was over. He didn't see a way back to doing what he loved. He said Jeff helped him find himself again, and he wanted to let him know in a very tangible way. There was a custom bike sitting in the driveway. Scotty had started working on it during therapy, and he wanted Jeff to have it. When Jeff arrived home, he'd tried to give the bike back, but Scotty wouldn't budge. Instead he convinced Jeff to join his club and ride with them. Jeff treasured the bike and sometimes after a bad day, Jensen would hear him working on the motorcycle long into the night.

"Yeah, just like Scotty," Jeff said, breaking into Jensen's thoughts. "I wish I knew why." He shook his head. "You got the article done?"

"Yeah. Remind me to say no to them next time. I swear if they had the chance they would change rats into fluffy unicorns and make the Black Death a little thing that just sort of happened."

"It just sort of killed a third of Europe?" Jeff laughed,

"Exactly, the other two I have are pretty simple—my column for *Dark Ages Now* and a basic piece on warfare in Northern Europe."

"Warfare and basic don't seem to go together."

"It's a short piece, just on the highlights. You know, first came copper, then bronze then one day a cannon killed people."

"Six thousand years in three hundred words or less?"

"Pretty much," Jensen replied. He served himself some of the sweet, sticky rice dessert. "How can you not love this?"

"Because it has more sugar in it than fifty-five million candy bars." Jeff frowned at him. "Or maybe it was sixty-five million."

"It's not that bad."

"Hummingbirds won't touch it."

"More for me," Jensen said, laughing. He noticed Jeff was watching him. "What?"

"How long has your hand been shaking like that?"

Jensen looked down at his hand. "I haven't noticed it before."

"I'm making a note." Jeff got the spiral bound notebook that he kept all Jensen's medical info in—meds, symptoms, allergies—everything they needed when they ended up in the ER. "While I have it down, tell me about your fall this morning."

"There isn't really much to tell. I stood up and got dizzy. I didn't have time to catch myself before I fell and I hit my head on the table."

"How long were you unconscious?"

"I wasn't. I was a little out of it. I remember staring up at the ceiling, watching the rain. Then I got up and went into the office."

"You don't remember bleeding or cleaning your face?"

Jensen sighed. Jeff had to know sooner or later anyway. "I don't know. I have a memory, but it might be a dream. It happens sometimes lately, especially if I nap. The dream is so real, I wake up thinking it's a memory. Sometimes I think it's a dream and later discover a Band-Aid or something that shows it wasn't a dream."

"How long have you been blacking out?"

"Only three times like this. You know about the other ones."

"I don't like this, Jensen, maybe we should call Dale."

"Not yet," Jensen protested. Dale Goodrich was his doctor. "I don't think it's time to add to the giant list of things going wrong yet."

"Jensen?"

"Please, not now?" Sometimes Jensen felt like every time they added something to the list, his health took another turn for the worst. It was one of the reasons he was taking so long to mention things. He didn't want them to become a reality.

Jeff met his eyes with a long, searching look. After a moment he nodded. "Okay, but the next time it happens, you have to let me know, okay?"

"I was planning to, anyway."

"I know you were." Jeff put his hand on Jensen's shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. "I know this isn't easy. You want to intellectualize it, find the answer, know *why* your body is breaking. You're frustrated that you can't find the answer, you are angry no one seems to care because it's a glacial erratic."

"A glacial erratic?" Jensen couldn't stop a smile.

"Can you think of a better way to describe it? You are a lonely rock forsaken by the great glacier of medicine," Jeff said dramatically.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"I'm not sure. It gives us something concrete to go kick. We should plan a trip to the mountain."

"What?" Jensen asked.

"Go up to Rainier. We could climb to one of the glaciers and give it a kick for good measure."

"With our luck we'd unleash the lahar that ate the Valley."

"True. We are lucky that way." Jeff plopped back into a chair. "But kicking a glacier would feel good."

"You'd rather kick that asshole Johnston," Jensen offered.

"At least," Jeff agreed. "What a load of shit. I just hope he gets the same treatment when he gets sick. It still drives me nuts. What the hell did he mean ..."

"Hey," Jensen said, stopping Jeff before he could get going. "It's done. We knew he probably wouldn't be any help when we went to see him, anyway."

"He could have at least tried a little compassion."

"I think he functions above compassion. Maybe it's the way he deals with his job. Most of his patients are terminal."

Jeff made a rude noise and Jensen hid a smile. He'd been devastated by the treatment he received at the hands of the specialist. When he'd walked out of the exam room, Jeff knew immediately something had happened. Jensen tried to get his friend out of the office before he told him what Johnston said. It didn't work. Jeff stopped him and asked what happened. Jensen might procrastinate with the truth, but he never lied to Jeff. When he told him what the doctor had said, he thought for sure Jeff was going to explode. He went completely white, turned bright red, then asked the nurse in a soft whisper if he might speak with the doctor. The entire floor heard the discussion. Hearing Jeff in full attack mode made Jensen feel a little better.

“I’d still like to kick his ass, just a tiny bit.”

“Me too.” Jensen stood. “I’m going to check my email and make sure they don’t want any changes on the stupid article before the game comes on.”

“Okay. I got ice cream and potato chips. Don’t be too long, you don’t want to miss the start.”

“I won’t.” Jensen laughed, carried his plate to the sink and headed to his office.

The keyboard was buried under the hard copy of the article he’d printed out to check for typos and other errors. He found he could edit more efficiently on paper than on the screen. After digging out his keyboard, he opened his email—there was nothing important there, so he closed the program.

He was just getting up to go when he stopped and opened the browser to The Artists’ Cave. There were several new comments on the pictures he’d posted and one on an older one. He answered them, and was almost finished when the notification of a message came through. He clicked on the icon.

*Hey, I have no idea how to say thank you for all the comments. It was far more than just “amazing” and “awesome”! It means a lot coming from someone with a good eye for things—and yes, you do have one. I know you were about to say it was all luck, but it’s not. You have to know where to point the camera before you even have a chance for the lucky shot.*

*I think what draws me in to so many of your photos is they convey a quality of a complete world, of stories waiting to be told. It’s truly an amazing thing. I wish I saw things that way. There is so much beauty, so much calm peace in your pictures—even those photos of the storm have a sense of things being RIGHT if you know what I mean. The photos of the path—they were the best you’ve put up. There is true magic there, an entire world waiting there to be discovered. I hope you don’t mind. I didn’t get around to sketching the spider. I had some work to do, then I saw your pictures and had to do this. I’m calling it *The Wandering Wood* for now, I will find a better title later, I’m sure, they do hit me now and then ☺. Pike.*

Jensen caught his breath, beneath the comment was the beginning of a story. The first paragraph had him enthralled. Pike had described the path, that small section of the woods in the photo, but now it was alive with life—things hidden in the shadows, characters seeking their souls or their lives—it was breathtaking in its simple beauty. Jensen read it all, then read it again. Glancing at the clock, he knew Jeff would be calling him for the game, but he had time and he had to let Pike know what the story meant. How truly beautiful it was. He shifted a little, read the final paragraph again and hit reply.



## Six

The sun was shining, casting warm light across the soft plush carpet in the living room as Jared walked to the balcony with a cup of coffee in his hand. He planned on enjoying his first cup outside before he headed into the office to get to work. After five days the rain had finally relented during the night and the morning was bright and humid, the balcony deck giving off steam as it dried in the sunlight. He watched the ships moving across the water as he sipped his coffee. The Olympics were beautiful, dark purple against the blue sky. As he looked at them he wondered if he could catch those colors in a sketch. It was the kind of thing Merlin captured so well in his photos, now Jared found himself looking for those moments to sketch. The world seemed a little broader than it had five days before. Jared smiled, his therapist thought it was good he had a “friend” albeit one he had never seen as far as he knew. But since the first exchanges on The Artists’ Cave, they had started corresponding back and forth on a daily basis. Saturday there had been the usual note from Merlin, then while Jared was working, the notification for a message opened. Checking the note, it was Merlin telling him about an orca pod that had been spotted by Vashon and he was heading out to try and “*catch the bloody whales on film. The hummingbirds are paying them off, I’m pretty sure.*” Jared laughed softly. Merlin got obsessive about things sometimes.

It was weird that he felt that sure about someone he’d never met, but in their written conversations, he began to realize that Merlin was well educated, well-spoken and tended to get stuck on things. The hummingbird at sunset was a continual sore point, but other things had come up—an otter sticking its nose out of a drain the one day Merlin had gone walking without his camera. There was deer that ate a rose before he could photograph either the perfect bud or the deer. Usually his notes were chatter, and they made Jared smile. It was nice talking to someone other than himself—once he got past that first panic. When he realized that Merlin had to live in the Northwest it had been scary. The idea of being found and hurt kept him away from the computer for part of the third day of correspondence. He’d called his therapist and he assured Jared that it was okay, and to remind himself it was a keyed elevator behind double doors. It would be okay. So, Jared let it be okay, and kept the conversation going.

In many ways it was different than any other friendship—if he could call it that—he’d had. High school had been about being the top student, as had college and grad school. After that all his focus was on his writing career and moving that forward as quickly as possible. For the most part, the relationships he’d formed tended to be fleeting. In college there wasn’t time, afterwards he was always suspicious if it was himself—or the bestselling novelist—people wanted to be friends with. After the attack, of course, everything had come to a halt. For the last few years it felt like every day pushed him one step further from humanity. The conversations with Merlin were different. There was no demand, no prodding for information. Merlin was chatty, and Jared found himself answering in kind. It was all superficial, the weather, animals, the light for drawing or photography and yet somehow there was a deeper component. He was beginning to see the kind of person Merlin was, even though they had never talked on a personal level. When it occurred to him that maybe Merlin was learning about him it caused a momentary panic spike. He had to breathe through it, there was a keyed elevator and he lived behind double doors. It was okay.

Jared stood and headed into his office. There was a shaft of sunlight on the desk, lighting the pile of papers he’d left there the night before—several sketches that needed to be scanned in and the rest a pile of scribbles and scratches as he’d tried different techniques with the new pencils he’d ordered. Charlie had brought them the day before and Jared given himself time play with them instead of writing on the new *Fallen* book. He felt like he could take the time off, he’d been writing at a chapter and a bit a day, and was within a week of finishing the first draft of the book. The story that Merlin’s photos had inspired was also growing, three completed chapters. After he’d sent the first over, Merlin had commented on the story inline, so now Jared was sending the chapters off before he read them over and started tinkering with them to see how they read in their “raw” state.

Opening the computer, he checked his email. There was a note from his agent about the new *Fallen* novel, asking about the timeline so they could get to work on marketing. Jared replied, grinning as he wrote back. Henry would be shocked—Jared was a month ahead of schedule. It felt good to be ahead. He didn’t mind deadlines, but he preferred to write without the pressure of a date looming on the horizon. It tended to make his writing sloppy, hurried and his characters suffered. Sometimes they even just stopped and stared at him—or that was how it felt. When he’d been working on a book the year before, he had gotten sidetracked on the plot and didn’t realize it until it ground to a halt one day and it didn’t move for a week. He read through it, backed up and ditched twenty thousand words and it started again.

After replying to his agent, he started deleting the mass of spam that flowed into his inbox every day. He marked most of it as junk, in hopes the sender would end up in the spam folder the next time. There were so many, however, he guessed he would never be entirely free of it, especially on his Pike65 email. He had his blog and his account on theartistscave.com tied to his Pike65 email so, in theory at least, no one could track that identity back to Jared. He was on the last of the emails telling him he’d won the national lottery and could collect his millions for

only five thousand dollars when he noticed that one of the few remaining emails was notification of a reply to his latest blog. He clicked on the link to his blog.

*I think you've really hit on something here. I never really considered that as a factor in the overall reaction to the plague in Europe. I hadn't considered the literary aspects of the issue at all. It is especially true in the later epidemics. I have backtracked and reread things in a different light. It is an interesting perspective. If you look at the writings of J. Vesuvia in 1583, the points you mention are clear in his work and I have never really taken notice of them before. This could be a major breakthrough in the studies of historical epidemics. Does this mean I have to share publication rights? LOL ;) Merlin.*

Jared stared at the note for a long time. He knew people stopped on the blog, he suspected some even read it, but to have an answer for the first time after years seemed odd. The fact it was Merlin was both pleasing and terrifying. Did he know who Jared was? Could he ... Jared stopped, there was a second comment.

*I actually have been reading your blog for a week. One of your entries was reblogged by Peter Brooks and I was surprised to discover it was you! I've been reading through them for the last few days while the hummingbird mocks me from his perch. He is sitting there now, all perfectly posed like a model for a birding book. If I move my hand towards the camera? He takes off, and I am SITTING INSIDE. I think he hates me. LOL! Merlin.*

The panic slowed. He rubbed his hands on his legs and let the shaking stop before he added a reply. The comments made him more curious about who Merlin really was. Both blogs he'd mentioned were some of the more "scholarly" ones Jared posted—he sometimes had an attack of grad school and something academic poured out of him. Before *The Day It Happened*, he'd kept the musings to himself, but somehow now he needed that outlet. On bad days it helped to get into that mindset, objective and removed, and then put it on paper. He hadn't even realized it was one of his coping mechanisms until he'd mentioned it to his therapist. Now he didn't worry about it, when seized with the academic bug he would just add it to his blog along with his other random musings. Knowing at least one person was reading felt better than he thought it would. He had convinced himself it didn't matter, but it really did. Knowing that one person was Merlin made it that much better.

Jared glanced at his sketches. He really wanted to scan them in, but he decided that would be his reward for finishing another chapter. It wasn't hard to do, he had finally reached the point where the book was writing itself and he was anxious to see where the characters decided to go every chapter. He was really pleased with this entry into the series, and was pretty sure it was going to be the best of the lot so far. His main character was taking some interesting turns, Jared had to revise the outline to accommodate them, but it felt right, and he wasn't going to argue with that feeling.

When he was finished with the chapter, he opened *The Wandering Wood*. He wanted to get another part of it finished and over to Merlin. It was turning out to be an interesting work. Inspired by the photos, instead of a single character narrative, each photo dealt with at least one character and they were all intertwined by the things that wandered up and down the path. It was a new style for him and he was thinking of sending it to Henry when he was finished to see if the publisher would be interested in something a little different. There were aspects of horror, but it wasn't as dark as his other two series. It was mostly written for himself—and Merlin—so he wasn't spending much time on the worry of publication. He did hope, however, if it was picked up he could use one of Merlin's photos for the cover.

His stomach rumbled at him sometime later. Jared looked up, somehow it was nearly five o'clock. Once he was writing, he often lost track of time. It had taken him several sessions to convince his therapist that was normal and something that had been true before. Generally, he stopped when he got hungry. When he was really in the groove, it was usually one full skipped meal before he came up for air—and today was one of those days.

Jared stood, stretched and headed into the kitchen. His fridge was full, and he was in the mood for Asian food, so he got out the vegetables, tofu and sauces and started cooking. Since *The Day It Happened*, he had tended towards vegetarianism. He still ate meat, but some days the scent of blood was too much for him to stand. If he had Charlie get him something already cooked it was okay, but some days he couldn't handle making it for himself. He could always tell those days, and didn't even bother trying to cook meat. He had several cookbooks full of Asian and Indian recipes and he was working his way slowly through them. Some dishes he liked and marked to make again, some were okay once and there were several that went straight from stove into the compost bin. He wasn't sure exactly what had gone wrong and he'd been tempted to try again, but the first attempt had been so disastrous he refused to pollute the air in the apartment just to try it again.

Tonight, though, the food turned out better than he'd guessed from the recipe. He marked the page with a purple paperclip. It was officially a "top choice" for another meal. He laughed as looked at the five preceding pages, all held together with a black clip. Five disasters in a row and the last one had taken three days to get out of the place.

Jared set the table and sat down with a book, enjoying the food and the quiet. He felt like he'd gotten a lot done and could relax over dinner. There was even a small dessert baking in the oven for later when he settled down in front of the TV. He was careful of what he watched. Since The Day It Happened, he avoided crime shows like the plague. Usually it meant a night with a food channel or one of the history channels, depending on what was on. Tonight was what he thought of as "quack" night on one of the history channels. It was his favorite night for TV.

He wanted to get his sketches scanned in and on [theartistscave.com](http://theartistscave.com) before the show came on. As soon as he finished dinner, he dropped the plates into the dishwasher and headed back into the office. He warmed up the scanner and was scanning in the first sketch when the notification popped up for a message. It was late for a Merlin, in fact, he'd been a little worried when he sat down and there was no note. He started the upload for second sketch and opened the note.

*I can't believe it. That damn bird was there, perfectly in front of the sunset, perfectly still until the INSTANT the shutter closed. I have a lovely picture of a sunset and a blur. It's diabolical. How did it know? One of these days! I thought for sure I had him today. You're laughing, aren't you? I wouldn't blame you. Once I got through swearing, I laughed too. I just ... Grrr, you know? I did get a great shot of a jay that came by to raid the grapes. He seems very fond of them and has been dropping by in the evenings. He's a bit of a dandy and enjoys posing for photos. I am wondering if I can convince him to talk to the hummingbird for me. And...I might be losing what's left of my mind! LOL! I was thinking, if you wanted, you could email me direct. Less Big Brother potential. It's okay if you don't, but if you do I'm [TackyMerlin@NWCable](mailto:TackyMerlin@NWCable).*

Jared took a deep breath. He had the new chapter and it would be a lot easier to attach to an email. It was terrifying, his hands were shaking as he opened his Pike65 email and typed in the address. It was the first email he'd ever sent from this account, and the first email to someone other than his agent, doctor or therapist since he'd been injured. He typed a letter, wondering how it would sound to Merlin, attached the chapter. It was a keyed elevator, he was behind double doors. One more look at the email and he hit send. And he was okay.

## Seven

There was a whisper of wind blowing through the window, bringing with it the scent of the garden. Jeff was watering, and Jensen could smell the moisture on the air. There were so few really nice days in the Northwest that each one needed to be savored and remembered during the long, wet winter. Which was why Jensen was upset—he was stuck in bed and it was a beautiful day. The hummingbird had been perching on the cable wire outside the window off and on. Jensen managed to get several good pictures of him as well as a bald eagle that perched in the trees along the edge of the lake, his head bright white against the blue of the sky.

Jensen sighed, it was his own fault he was stuck in bed, but that didn't take the sting out of it. It was better than the hospital, and Jeff had given him the choice bed or hospital. The surprising thing was that Jeff gave him a choice at all. When the pain started, and he nearly collapsed in the living room the night before, Jeff had freaked. Jensen still wasn't sure how he managed to avoid the 911 call, it was a haze of pain when he looked back, but Jeff had relented as long as he promised to spend the day in bed. In all honesty, it had been coming on for almost a week. Every meal was a little more agonizing, even though he was trying to hide it. He really didn't want one more thing in the Big Book.

The new pain had started at dinner five days before, when he swallowed it felt like his food was stuck halfway down and he had to take a second swallow to get it all the way to his stomach. The next day it was harder, and by yesterday morning he was dreading the first bite of breakfast. He could feel it starting, pulling under his arms and across his chest. It had gone completely out of control when he unthinkingly had a handful of corn chips. His throat seized up and the pain crossed his chest in a flash of agony. He remembered getting up, hoping to get to the bathroom before Jeff figured something was wrong. Jensen wasn't sure why he thought he could get away with it. He made it three steps before his body gave out. The rest of the memory was lost in pain, but he woke up on the couch about midnight with Jeff asleep in the recliner.

Now as he watched the hummingbird preen on the wire, he was happy he said whatever it was that worked. He kind of wanted to ask Jeff, but that would give away the fact his memory had a hole in it—which would freak Jeff out even more. Jensen picked up his camera and aimed it at the bird sitting on the wire, zooming in tight to get a detail of the green head and bright red throat. He managed to get three pictures before the it took off. The fact that he sat at all had been a surprise. Jensen wasn't sure if all hummingbirds did a lot of sitting, or if he had the laziest hummingbird on earth living in his yard. One night in early summer he had filmed the bird sitting in the honeysuckle drinking from the flowers closest to him until finally overreached himself and—in what Jensen was sure was a hummingbird equivalent of “I meant to do that”—took off when he tumbled from the branch.

Jensen wanted to go to his office and upload the last few days of photos. When Jeff went outside, he decided to try and sneak down, but four steps away from the bed and he knew it was a mistake. He snatched his tablet from the dresser and went back to bed. He turned it on and opened one of the many games he played. It killed time and he was waiting for his now nightly email from Pike. One night it had been late, but Pike apologized and said he'd gotten caught at work and was running late.

More than once Jensen tried to figure out what Pike did for a living. They didn't talk about anything serious. No, that wasn't quite right. They had hashed through some fairly weighty ideas and philosophies in the last two weeks since they exchanged emails. It was the personal topics they avoided, bringing them up only in the most general way. He knew Pike lived in Seattle. Pike knew he lived on the plateau. They seemed to share a lot of interests, including some odd esoteric things that surprised Jensen every time one of them came up. Pike was a man of mystery. On the other hand, Jensen was not really open about himself, because of the scandal, and so he probably was a man of mystery for Pike. Still their friendship was growing. The story *The Wandering Wood* was reaching novel length and Pike one night had mentioned something about wanting to use Jensen's pictures. It seemed like an odd comment, but he let it slide. There was a lot they didn't know about each other.

Jeff whole-heartedly approved of the relationship—no matter how anonymous it was—because it was the first time Jensen had reached out to anyone since the scandal. Sure, he answered comments on his photos on theartistscave.com, one or two people he even had something of a bantering relationship with because of their frequent comments. With Pike it was different. Jensen could feel the difference, and knew that's what Jeff was seeing. Why it was Pike that finally reached him, Jensen couldn't answer. He just did, and that's the way it was.

“What do you want for dinner?” Jeff asked from the door of the bedroom.

“Dinner? Isn't it a little early?”

“It's five, Jensen.” Jeff's voice was full of concern as he came over and looked closely at Jensen. “Were you sleeping?”

“I guess I must have dosed off,” Jensen answered, although he couldn't remember the transition between waking and sleep and that was beginning to bother him. The quasi-blackouts he'd been having for the last year

always came with a warning. Double vision, a heavy feeling in his head, then his body would feel as if he'd been given anesthetic and he could not, no matter what he tried, stop it. He'd almost collapsed in a store or on a walk when the feeling hit him. It was hard to keep going. The last time it happened, they had been taking a walk in one of the state parks in the area and Jensen started seeing double, before long he had slowed down to a snail's pace. All his energy was going into keeping one foot moving in front of the other. The world narrowed to the trail and a fight that felt like he was trekking through thick snow while his brain slowly shut down. He made it to the car, but was out before Jeff pulled away from the parking area. Jensen hoped Jeff had just put it down as overdoing it. But it hadn't worked. Jeff knew something was wrong and spent a little more time home in the days after that. Since it usually happened when he was watching TV or reading, it looked natural. Jensen was pretty sure it wasn't, but he was willing to play along, trying to let the nagging terror that his brain was malfunctioning go as much as he could.

Then it all changed. It had been a month since the first one—since that transition was no longer there. He thought there might have been a hint of double vision but one minute he was watching the beginning of a movie and the next he woke up as the good guys were settling in for the final battle. He'd hoped it was a fluke. It wasn't. The transition was almost completely gone. Sometimes it came with double vision. Now and then he would still have the lead-in of the heavy feeling before going out, but not often. The night before he'd given himself quite a scare when he was playing on his tablet, then the next thing he knew there was a bright flash of light that penetrated his dream and he jerked awake, heart pounding, only to discover he'd somehow leveled up in the game.

The incident added a whole new level of fear to his life. Was he awake or asleep? He knew sometimes when he blacked out in the car, he would keep talking—or if he was at home texting—to Jeff. The problem was it was nothing but gibberish. Jeff still insisted one night Jensen had argued with him over what was in cookies. No matter how he laughed it off, it haunted him. Was he awake, was this a dream, was he awake, was this a dream. It had become a mantra.

He knew his body was up when he thought he was asleep. There was a broken toe and bandaged hand to prove that. One night he woke up in the bathroom with his razor in his hands and an obsession to shave his head. Luckily, he didn't. That would have been hard to laugh off with Jeff. But now there was no escape. It haunted him every moment. He'd stopped driving for physical reasons at first, now he wouldn't trust himself to get any place. Of course, he worried more about blacking out and hurting someone, rather than killing himself. He couldn't face the idea of traveling at all without a trusted companion—and it was all because of this phantom issue in his brain that he was not willing to talk about to Jeff or his doctors. He didn't want to know.

"Jensen?" Jeff's voice broke into his thoughts.

"What?"

Jeff looked at him for a long moment, a frown on his face. He took a breath, like he was going to say something, shook his head and smiled. "Dinner?"

"I don't know. Something good?"

"Helpful, really helpful."

"Maybe your world-famous mac and cheese?" Jensen said, after he thought about it for a moment.

"Do you want to come down to eat?"

"Do I get to get out of bed?"

"Well, I'm sure as hell not carrying you and the bed downstairs," Jeff replied with a grin.

"Good." Jensen stood up, letting his equilibrium settle, knowing Jeff's eyes were on him the whole time. "I thought you were going to cook?"

"Yep, on the way."

Jensen waited until Jeff was out of sight before he took an experimental step. He was feeling stronger than he had earlier in the day. He hated to admit it, but staying in bed had helped. As he made his way downstairs, he could hear Jeff in the kitchen. The pans were rattling together—Jeff was upset and taking it out on the kitchenware. Jensen stopped in the doorway and watched Jeff. The other man's shoulders drooped as he stood by the stove.

"Well?" Jensen asked, walking into the room and dropping into one of the chairs at the table.

"Well?" Jeff kept his back to him.

"You'll feel better if you get it off your chest."

"You," Jeff said, turning around, "need to stop throwing my words back at me."

"Where is the fun in that?" Jensen grinned at him. Jeff drained the macaroni and added it to the sauce, stirring it for a minute before dumping it all into a pan and sprinkling cheese on top. He opened the oven and shoved the pan inside. "Silence will do you no good," Jensen added.

"You know some people might get pissed that you keep hassling them with their own words."

"Some people might. And staring into the oven with the door open will result in uncooked food and an overly warm kitchen."

Jeff sighed, closed the door and face Jensen. “You want to tell me what’s going on?”

“What?”

“When I came in and asked you about dinner, you had no idea what time it was. Am I right?”

“Um,” Jensen said, trying to stall until he could think of an excuse Jeff couldn’t see right through.

“Yeah, don’t bother, talk.”

“I black out.”

“What do you mean?” Jeff sat down across from him.

“It started out with a sort of sleepy feeling, but these last few times I have no memory of being sleepy or nodding off. It’s like I’ve been drugged. One minute I’m doing something, then it’s an hour—sometimes more—later. I don’t know what it means. Sometimes I think I’ve been asleep having odd dreams and I wake up and there’s something wrong.”

“Like the bandage on your hand?”

“Yeah. I woke up—or thought I did—and my knuckle looked weird and swollen. I couldn’t get a good look at it, so I tried to use the magnifier on my phone. I did actually take a picture of it, it’s on my phone. But after that it’s fuzzy. I woke up with the sense I’d dreamed it all—until I saw my hand.”

“That’s what actually happened to your foot, too, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea how it happened. I went to bed and it was fine, I woke up and it was broken.”

“Hmm.” Jeff glanced out the window. “I don’t like it, we need to call Dale.”

“Not yet, please.”

“You said that a couple of weeks ago,” Jeff said gently. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed, you aren’t that good at being sneaky.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready for bad news.”

“It might not be bad.”

“I am randomly blacking out, I’ve hurt myself at night, I’m sometimes not sure if I’m awake or asleep.” Jensen stopped. He hadn’t meant to go quite that far. “How can that not be bad?”

“I don’t know. Are you sleeping? No, wait.” Jeff held up his hands. “I mean when you know you’ve slept, are you sleeping well? Nightmares? Or anything like that?”

“I have been having nightmares. Usually it’s something dismembering and devouring me.”

“So, happy dreams,” Jeff said, laughing a little. He met Jensen’s eyes. “Okay, here is the deal. We track your symptoms for a week. We track your food, how many of each medication you take, and at then look at the pile and see if we call Dale. Does that work?”

“That works,” Jensen answered with a sigh. If he didn’t compromise he knew Jeff would drag him to the doctor. “So, tonight it’s mac and cheese with green beans and sparkling water.”

“And salted caramel gelato.”

“What?”

“If you think you can choke it down of course,” Jeff said, laughing, his eyes bright.

“I might be able to,” Jensen replied, echoing his laugh. “Anything good on tonight?”

“I figured we’d try the hunter gather method of TV and just search until something that doesn’t suck comes on.”

“It usually works for us—we would have missed that whole series on the Black Death.”

“And that was just great as dinner entertainment,” Jeff said sourly.

“That’s when you started insisting we eat at the table most of the time.” Jensen noticed Jeff had the Big Book in his hands. “We didn’t even get to the good part.”

“The ‘bring out your dead’ part? Thanks, but no, glad I missed it.” He was writing, then stopped and looked up. “When did you say the black outs changed?”

“About a month ago.”

“That’s about right. I was hoping it was just my paranoia.”

“If it makes you feel better, I was too.”

“No, it doesn’t really.” Jeff set the pen down. “Is there anything else new? Besides the pain swallowing?”

Jensen’s was about to shake his head, then thought better of it. “I have holes in my memory too. Not just when I’m sleeping, or maybe I am sleeping—that’s the real problem I guess, I don’t know if I’m awake or asleep some of the time. I remember things that you say never happened and I don’t remember things you say happened.”

“I am liking this less and less.”

“You promised a week,” Jensen said.

“And you get a week. After that, I am calling Dale.”

“Fine.” Jensen sighed, even though he felt better for telling Jeff. Not that he’d admit it. And he could tell from the way Jeff slapped the book closed that he was happier with the situation. The fact he didn’t bring it up again at all during dinner just underlined the fact.

After dinner, Jeff headed into the living room with a cup of coffee and Jensen went into his office just long enough to check his email. He thought there was going to be a fight, but Jeff let him go with a stern look. Jensen laughed, Jeff’s “stern look” could probably kill—at least so the rumors on campus said. A momentary whisper of sadness sounded in his heart. He missed teaching some days. He missed the big office filled with the scent of old books and the burned coffee that sat in the faculty lounge across the hall. Even though he missed it, he couldn’t go back. Jensen had been offered his job back, but he didn’t want it anymore. He’d loved teaching, now he missed it occasionally, but the spark was gone.

He sat down at the computer and turned the screen on. There were several emails from a magazine that wanted a story. Jensen was still debating whether or not to do it. He despised what he thought of as “fluffy” history—the past with all the meat, the drama, and horror removed. It was easier when someone wanted a story on gardening or building in the past; the ones on daily life could be difficult to write “fluffy” and he was never sure how much to include and how much to gloss over.

After getting those out of the way, he opened his other account and started going through, deleting spam and the notifications of comments on theartistscave.com. There seemed to be more comments lately, he didn’t why, but it was fun seeing all the notifications. He had one troll and was, at least for now, baiting him. Eventually the troll would say something to get banned from the site, and Jensen was giving him every chance he could.

Pike’s email came in as he was replying to the troll. Jensen finished his comments and eagerly opened the email. Looking at the size of the attachment there was a long chapter to go through tonight. He smiled. The chapters were helping him get through long sleepless nights. It gave him something to focus on besides the pain and illness.

*Hey—I can’t believe how this chapter turned out! You are going to be stunned with what Spenser does. I couldn’t believe it even as I was writing it. I love it when that happens, when the characters come alive and demand their story be told the way they want it told. I’m sure I sound like a maniac when I say that, but it’s true. When I really have a story going, I am as surprised as a reader sometimes when I go back to read something. In fact, I love it when that happens. I remember a prof in grad school talking about a comment from someone—I can’t remember who but Big Name Writer—and he said he doubted it very much that things were written without outlining or plotting. I ended up leaving the seminar when I said it really worked that way sometimes. He didn’t believe me, but then again, he was a self-important king of a tiny kingdom. Don’t get me wrong, I loved my studies, but some profs are just jerks. It still drives me nuts. I got off track there a bit, didn’t I? I still think you are going to be surprised.*

*You won’t believe this ... but I had a hummingbird on my deck. I didn’t even know they were in this part of the city. I was out having coffee and thought I was being attacked by the biggest bee in Washington, but it turned out to be a hummingbird. I think it might be the flowers on the deck below me that attracted him. It surprised me when he buzzed my head and sat down on the rail. I didn’t know they just sat like that! He was there for almost five minutes. I tried a quick sketch, but it is really quick more the “spirit” of hummingbird than a drawing. I can understand your frustration. I was just getting the color of his head right when he zoomed off, the bastard.*

*Do you think animals are lazy like we are? I remember as kids they always said male lions were lazy because they tended to lay around, let the cubs bite their tails and let the lionesses bring home the gnus. I never thought they were lazy, I just thought that’s what they are, you know? They let the cubs chomp their ears, nap in the sun and occasionally stretch. Sometimes I think if people were as sure of their place as lions or leopards or even your fiendish hummingbird they would be better off. I wonder if things would change if we could find the space to be who we are? Would there be less violence? Less horror? Or more? Once upon a time I would have said it would be a better world. Now I wonder.*

*Sorry, got off track a bit. It was an odd day. I have them sometimes. Talk soon! Pike*

Jensen emailed the chapter to his ereader, looking forward to reading and commenting that night. The story was growing in an organic way and he was enjoying it more and more. He was picky about his fiction, having suffered through a Literature minor while an undergraduate. It wasn’t that he was a snob—rather the exact opposite—he preferred things that were distracting. His life had enough drama, he didn’t need to add to it. Both he and Jeff avoided hospital shows with a passion—just one more thing they didn’t need in their life.

He hit reply in the email, still musing over Pike’s comments. Now and then there was a streak of melancholy in them. Jensen wasn’t sure if he was reading something in or if it was actually there. It was hard to tell with just words on a page. Still, sometimes it sounded, not sad, but something. Jensen equated it with the pain he lived with day in

and day out. It was never really a sharp, conscious pain, but it wore away at him and by the end of the day he was exhausted without ever realizing why until later. He wondered how to reply. After a minute he started writing.



## Eight

There was rain sluicing over the windows, blurring the view of downtown and Puget Sound. At street level it was probably not a bad day to be out, but at the top of a tall building the story was different. It had taken some getting used to when he'd first moved in. Jared had never been bothered by bad weather—but up here bad weather was multiplied and sometimes he wished he could escape the noise. Knowing the building was built to sway in heavy winds or an earthquake was both comforting and unsettling. Today it felt comforting, because it meant he was a long way from the street, up a keyed elevator and behind two sets of doors. Over the last month and a half, Jared had only been locking the deadbolt and doorknob. The night before that had changed. Now all ten locks were locked.

It had been a bad night.

The whole thing started off so simply. He'd sent his chapter off to Merlin, and posted a few pictures on The Artists' Cave and then sat down to watch TV. It was his one night a week for network TV. He tended to shy away from it because he really disliked the news. He streamed most of network programming he watched to avoid the commercials. This show didn't offer streaming, so he was stuck with the terrors of the "Mattress Ranch" commercials. He was in the kitchen during a break when he heard the news come on. The Space Needle comic and science fiction convention—NeedleCon—was that weekend. There had been an argument that led to a fight and several people were hurt. Before Jared could stop himself, he walked into the living room and looked at the television. There was huge poster for his latest book behind a group of people in costume, some with blood on their faces. Paramedics were loading someone into a waiting ambulance.

The panic came on so fast, so hard, so completely, that he couldn't stop it with deep breathing. Before he really knew what he was doing, he was locking all the locks and dragging a chair in front of the door for good measure. Next, he went and made sure the door to the balcony was locked and put a dowel in the channel to make sure the door couldn't be opened. By the time he was heading into the bedroom to make sure the glass doors were still secure, his brain caught up with him. He was at the top of a building. His door was locked with multiple locks. He was safe.

He didn't feel safe.

Jared headed into the bathroom and took his anxiety meds. His heart was still pounding in fear, even as the medication started clearing the fog of terror. It let him to get enough control to call his therapist. After an impromptu hour-long session, he was calm enough to go back into the living room and turn off the TV. He grabbed a favorite novel off the bookshelf and settled down in bed, listening to the wind howl against the building.

Things were a little better this morning. He was still anxious enough to take another pill, but he had made coffee and breakfast and settled down to watch reruns of the 2012 specials on the history channel. He sent Merlin a quick email from his phone. Jared knew there was no way he would be able to get the computer open today. The fear of... whatever.

That's what bothered him, the fear. It seemed to be getting worse, not better. His therapist gently suggested reaching out to someone else through more than email. It was a terrifying prospect. What if they wanted to... He stopped himself. It was ridiculous to think everyone on earth wanted to kill him. He'd gone all the way through grad school and years after with no one trying to kill him. Of course, part of his mind said, it only takes one.

At noon, he got up to make himself lunch. He tried to stay on a schedule—on bad days it helped give him focus. He knew he had to cook a meal, and he would start planning it out in his head. It was a good distraction and had gotten him through many days. Jared had just put a pot on the stove when he heard a key scrape against the inner door. He froze in terror, his hand halfway to the cooking spoon. The scrape came again and then the *snick* as the deadbolt was opened. Jared's breathing was ratcheting up. Someone was there. He turned the stove off and waited.

"Jared? Jared can you hear me?" The call came with a soft knock on the door. "It's Charlie, Jared." He knocked again. "Jared? I'm going to call you."

Jared was ready when his phone rang a moment later. "Hey," he said.

"Are you okay? What's with the door?" Charlie asked, his voice full of worry.

"I'm okay. I, uh, saw the news."

"News?" Charlie sounded confused. "Oh! About what happened at NeedleCon?"

"Yeah," Jared said, hearing the fear in his voice and hating the fact it was there at all.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"I need the truth, Jared, you know that. Are you okay?" Charlie asked firmly.

“Yeah, it’s not like before, Charlie,” Jared replied, remembering the day two years before when his bad day had gone from bad to worse. He didn’t remember much about that day but the fear and the panic, Charlie at the door and, a thousand years later, his therapist talking to him as he barricaded himself in the closet.

“Are you sure?” Charlie insisted.

“Yes.” He stared at the door, there was no way he could let Charlie in today. He couldn’t. Just thinking about opening the locks made his hands shake. The problem was, he also knew there was no way Charlie would leave until he was sure Jared was okay. “Leave the groceries in the entry and go into the hall. Lock the doors after you, and I’ll come in and get the stuff. Will that work?”

“I’ll wait in the hallway until you knock on the outer door, then I’ll leave.”

Jared could live with that. “Okay.”

“I’m putting everything down. I’m going out the door,” Charlie said. Jared heard the heavy door swing close. “I’m locking both deadbolts right now.”

Taking a deep breath, Jared lifted a trembling hand to the first lock on the door. His stomach turned, his heart was hammering so loud he could feel it pulsing in his ears. He managed to get the first lock undone after three tries, his hands slick with sweat. Jared still had the cell phone in his hand and he could hear Charlie humming softly. It wasn’t helping, but taking the time to tell him that wouldn’t help get the locks open.

It was fifteen minutes later when he finally opened the last lock. It was a record. Usually it took at least half an hour to get the first one, and that was when he knew no one was around. Managing in fifteen minutes felt good. He cautiously opened the door and peeked in. There was no one in the entry and he could see his bags in the box he left for deliveries on days like this. He grabbed them and reached out to knock on the door. His heart was speeding up again as his hand neared the solid metal of the door. Closing his eyes, he leaned forward and knocked on the door three times, stepped back into his living room and slammed the door closed.

“I’ll be back next week. Call me if you want anything special,” Charlie said.

Jared nearly dropped his phone, he’d forgotten Charlie was on the other end. “Thanks, see you next week,” he said, forcing the words out when it didn’t feel like he could even take a deep breath.

“Have a good one.” Charlie broke the connection.

Jared leaned against the door, still shaking, sweat pouring over his face. He looked at the bags in his hands. He’d done it. Six months ago, the food would have sat there for a day. It was a bad day, but maybe not as bad as he thought.

Feeling better, Jared carried the groceries into the kitchen and set them on the table. He took a slow breath and started putting everything away. It helped calm him even more. By the time he was done, he was able to set his pot back on the stove and make lunch. It was a little later than usual, so he made a smaller meal, but it was still food. When he sat down to eat, he was surprised that his nausea had gone away completely. The panic from earlier was almost gone as well. There was just a tiny flutter, like the ache in a bruise, left in his chest.

After lunch, he stretched out on the couch with his book. It was still several hours until his favorite cooking show was on—and since it was a cable channel, there was no news. Sometimes he wondered if he should pay more attention to what was going on in the world, but it tended to up his anxiety rather than helping. Merlin had said something odd one day about how “*leaving the news behind improved my life a lot*”. The statement had seemed out of place and Jared had wanted to ask more than once, but he let it go.

He wasn’t sure how long he’d been reading—the world tended to disappear—when his phone chimed with the notification for an email. He wasn’t sure why he picked it up, he’d promised himself a day free of email, but when he saw it was from Merlin he smiled and opened it. The panic started as soon as he saw the first line. Someone knew, they had to, they were going to... He stopped. It was a keyed elevator, behind double doors. It was coming from an email he knew. It was probably just spam from a hacked account. He took a breath and looked again.

*Hi, you don’t know me. My name is Jeff. I’m a friend of Merlin. I’m not quite sure what to do, and I’m hoping you can help. Merlin is in the hospital. I took him in three days ago. He is getting depressed, despondent and listless. The doctors are not sure if it is physical or emotional. I asked him this morning and he said he hadn’t emailed you yet today, and so I am taking a chance here. He hasn’t read any email today at all. He hasn’t even picked up his tablet to play games. Would you be willing to call him? I don’t know if it will help, but I’m getting desperate. His mood can have a drastic effect on his health and I’m hoping maybe talking to you might help. I don’t know. I can’t even guarantee he will answer the phone. If you call the room phone he is more likely to answer, I started using it when he wouldn’t answer his cell. If he doesn’t answer after eight rings, it switches to the nurses’ station and they’ll make him pick up. The direct line is 253.555.2212, if it rings to the nurse, tell her you want room 12. Like I said, I know this is asking a lot. If you want to talk to me, my number is 253.555.8950 call or text. Thanks.*

Jared stared at the email, trying to keep the panic pressing against his heart at bay. It had been years since he spoken to anyone other than his doctors, therapist, Charlie and the doorman in his building. His therapist had talked to him more than once about his isolation. Jared thought he was handling things better. A year ago, Charlie would never have been allowed in the entry way, let alone the apartment. When Jared's doctor needed an MRI to see why some of the scars were causing pain, Jared managed to get to and from the clinic without breaking down. Charlie had been helpful, as had the valium. He didn't remember much of the trek, but he knew he'd gone.

None of that mattered now as he stared at the email. He knew he'd come to look forward to the regular emails with Merlin, and a couple of nights they had both been online at the same time, so the emails went back and forth for a couple of hours. Somewhere between the first note and today, he had come to think of Merlin as a friend, maybe the first one in years—even before The Day It Happened. In a way it was freeing, getting to know someone he'd never met in person. It let the relationship grow naturally. He never felt like he *had* to email, he knew he wanted to, and that was the difference.

He picked up his phone. His number was private, if that even mattered. He was pretty sure the phones in the hospital didn't have caller ID. Jared's hands were shaking. He set the phone down again, swallowing hard. He couldn't do it. What if...? He glanced up at the email again. Jeff's concern was clear in the letter, his desperation to help Merlin. That's when Jared realized that Jeff had introduced himself, but had used Merlin—so he must understand about the need for anonymity. That seemed odd, but now that he thought of it, Merlin had made several comments that Jared had wondered about. He read the email and picked up his phone. His hands were trembling, sweat forming on his brow as he typed the number into his phone, he got halfway through before he had to set the phone down again. There was no way he could do it. He looked at the email again and really read it, read what was underneath the words, the fear and worry.

This time he picked up the phone, and typed the number in without stopping. Sitting down to stop the trembling in his legs, he took a slow breath and hit talk. The phone rang once, twice, three times and then there was a *clunk* as if the receiver had been picked up and dropped. Someone swore.

"I told you to leave off, Jeff," the person said, answering the phone. "What?" he snapped while Jared tried to get past the panic choking him. "Jeff, I mean it ..."

"Merlin?" Jared said, his voice almost half an octave higher than usual.

"What?"

"It's, um, Pike."

"Pike?"

"Yeah."

"How did you ...?" Merlin trailed off. "Jeff?"

"Yeah, he emailed."

"Dead. Next time I see him, I *will* kill him."

"Why didn't you say you were sick?" Jared found himself asking. He stopped, surprised that his panic was slipping away.

"I didn't think it was a big deal. I know I didn't mean to be in this hellhole more than a couple hours," Merlin said bitterly.

"I hate hospitals," Jared said honestly. "Last time I had to go to the doctor it took a couple of valium to get me in the door."

"Jeff only managed it because I passed out. By the time I knew what was happening I was here. Bastard." The word was said more with resignation than anger. "What am I missing in the world? They have the curtains drawn and there's nothing on for a couple of hours still. Why does TV suck more on weekends?"

"I have no idea." Jared laughed. "There was a show earlier about ancient 'weapons of death'."

"I missed that one, care to bring me up to speed? Just in case I wander into trouble?"

"Sure..." Jared stopped the trembling in his hands and started talking.

## Nine

Three days. Jensen been trapped in this room for three freaking days. The only escape he'd had was when he was ferried to another part of the building to have tests done. He'd lost track of the tests. All he knew is they drew his blood about every five hours. It was a continual fight to manage his pain, and it had taken nearly fourteen hours for them to even give him what his doctor had prescribed for him at home, let alone anything else. The stink in the place changed depending on what meal was being served, and it was all disgusting. He was surviving on peanut butter and jelly and Italian ices that came in cherry and lemon. He was varying the flavor depending on the meal. The toast was okay in the morning, but got horrible by the end of the day and he had no idea how that could happen. As the hours wore into days, his mood worsened to the point he was growling at everyone who came through the door. Jeff tried to call a couple of times. After the first day, Jeff had started calling the room phone because Jensen wasn't answering his cell. Jeff refused to take no for an answer and would make sure he talked to Jensen when he had the chance. He came by and stayed till the end of visiting hours every night.

Jensen frowned. Jeff said he was running to the cafeteria for a latte before they closed, but he'd been gone a long time. It seemed odd. He also hadn't asked dozens of questions about games he usually didn't care about. Jensen knew Jeff was worried, he sometimes expressed worry through nagging. He was planning on asking Jeff to spring him no matter what tomorrow. When the phone rang it startled him, he reached for it, dropped it and swore as he hauled it up by its cord.

"I told you to leave off, Jeff," Jensen growled into the phone. There was dead silence. "What?" he snapped. "Jeff, I mean it..."

"Merlin?" A voice asked. It didn't sound like Jeff, but he'd tried something like this once before.

"What?" Jensen replied. He was about to lay into Jeff when the caller spoke again.

"It's, um, Pike."

"Pike?" Jensen couldn't believe it. It was a pretty low trick.

"Yeah."

"How did you..." He trailed off. It had to be Pike, but how? The answer was obvious when he thought about it. "Jeff?"

"Yeah, he emailed."

"Dead. Next time I see him, I *will* kill him."

"Why didn't you say you were sick yesterday?" Pike sounded worried and something else Jensen couldn't put his finger on.

"I didn't think it was a big deal." Jensen heard the bitterness in his own voice. Jeff was trying to do his best, it didn't make it easier. "I know I didn't mean to be in this hellhole more than a couple hours."

"I hate hospitals," Pike said. "Last time I had to go to the doctor it took a couple of valium to get me in the door."

"Jeff only managed it because I passed out. By the time I knew what was happening I was here. Bastard." He sighed. If Jeff had gone to the trouble to contact Pike, he must be scared. "What am I missing in the world? They have the curtains drawn and there's nothing on for a couple of hours still. Why does TV suck more on weekends?"

"I have no idea." Pike paused. "There was a show earlier about ancient 'weapons of death'."

Jensen remembered seeing the preview. He missed that too, because this crummy hospital didn't get that channel even though the room cost thousands more than a five-star resort. "I missed that one, care to bring me up to speed? Just in case I wander into trouble?"

"Sure." Pike laughed for some reason. "They started with the Romans. They had all kinds of 'sophisticated weapons, very advanced for their time', including siege towers, believe it or not." Judging from the amused tone in Pike's voice he approached the shows in the same way as Jensen.

"Really? How did they manage that?"

"I'm guessing chicken bones and copper tools."

Jensen laughed. "No, that's *Mysterious History*."

"Oh, right, I forget. It's confusing keeping track of who knows what about which."

"Usually the Romans know shit," Jensen said with a laugh.

"Yeah, they went and wrote about what they did. Hard to make up stuff when they tell you how they did it."

Pike laughed too.

"They do try though," Jensen replied. "Did you see *The Roman Conspiracy*?"

"I did! I love how they couldn't decide if it was aliens or humans from the future."

"Don't forget it might be both." Jensen glanced up at the TV. "Why are they putting squid ink in a cupcake?" he said to himself.

“Are you watching *Battleground: Cupcake*?”

“Um, maybe?”

“I am too, it’s the repeat from the new one a few nights ago and I missed it.” Pike paused for a moment. “What does it taste like?”

“What?” Jensen asked.

“Squid ink—I’ve seen them use it on other shows and I have no idea what it tastes like.”

“Do you really want to know? I wondered what a ‘hundred-year-old egg’ tasted like when I was in college.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What did it taste like?” Pike said.

“Garbage? Um, if you could cram ‘gross and disgusting’ into a shell it would taste like one of those things.” Jensen laughed. “It’s what happens when alcohol meets ‘dare’—before you ask, it’s just like truth or dare, but we skipped the truth part because we know no one would pick it anyway.”

“Always good to plan ahead,” Pike agreed. “We had a similar game while I was in grad school. I was only stupid enough to join in once, after that I was done. What is that thing they just uncovered on the show?”

Jensen squinted trying to see the screen better. “It’s pink.”

“To go with the black ink, I guess, but what is it?”

“Maybe it’s better to not know?”

For some reason, that made Pike laugh. After a moment Jensen joined in—and the conversation continued that way. They talked about nothing—like their emails—the show they were watching, the weather, the hummingbird at the house, and Pike’s crow he was sketching. Pike talked a bit about the next part of *The Wandering Wood*, he said he was using one of the winter pictures as inspiration.

“Visiting hours are about over, Jensen,” Jeff said from the door, breaking into a friendly debate over the relative worth of purple dye in the ancient world.

“I’ll let you go, Merlin, I’ll call tomorrow, if that’s okay.” There was an awkward pause for a moment, Jensen had no idea where it came from. “If you make your escape email me, okay?”

“I will, thanks for calling, Pike. It helped,” he said honestly, then frowned at Jeff who was nodding his head. “Talk soon.”

“Yeah, take care.”

“You too,” Jensen said and heard the click as Pike broke the connection. “Think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?” he said to Jeff as he walked towards the bed.

Jeff looked at him for a long moment. Jensen knew it was the “truth or mostly truth” game Jeff sometimes played with himself. It always worked out to the truth eventually—Jeff had an amazing store of guilt. Jensen wondered about it, but he knew that they would talk about it when the time came. They always did. “I had to do something, Jensen.”

“You used my email?” Jensen asked, frowning.

“I did.” Jeff dropped a hand on his arm. “I was afraid you were giving up.”

The comment startled Jensen. He knew he was grumbling more than usual, but it had been a rough three days. It took three doctors to even get someone to listen to them. Jeff called a friend—a friend who happened to be director of emergency services—and demanded action. Since then Jeff and his friend had been checking every test, every nurse in the room, every doctor. “I’m sorry, Jeff,” he said quietly.

“Have you?”

“Have I what?”

“Given up.”

“No,” Jensen answered honestly. “I am frustrated by all the tests and the ‘we don’t know’ that comes after every single one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. It’s hard not to get frustrated when nothing changes.”

“I know.” Jeff sighed and sat down.

“I want to go home.”

“Jensen…”

“Can they do anything else, right now, except stick more needles in me and send me for more tests and feed me shit for food?” It came out a lot harsher than he expected, the frustration, the fear, even the boredom piled into one larger emotion that was something akin to rage. *Huh*, he thought, *I might need to look at that a little closer.*

Jeff was quiet for a long moment. “I’ll talk to your doctor. Being home is probably better for you, I can bring you in for tests. You never do well in a hospital.”

“If they could or would help me, it would be something else, you know?”  
“I know, Jensen, I know,” Jeff agreed, his eyes bright.

## Ten

There was a huge ship, piled high with containers making its way across the Sound as Jared made breakfast. The wind was blowing, whipping up frothy whitecaps on the water. It was the kind of day he once would have spent at the beach, watching the gulls turn and wheel in the wind. Before *The Day It Happened*, he would get up early and go for a run before writing. It cleared the mind and let the story settle in his brain so when he sat down to write it was there ready to be translated onto the page. Now he worked differently, although the photos from Merlin had formed a story almost like in the time before. The more he thought about it the more he realized how different that story was from his others. He wasn't sure what the difference was but there was something there.

Sipping his coffee, he thought about the conversation the day before. It had been like their emails, chatty, hopping from one subject to the next, but there was an undercurrent as well. He had a better grasp on who Merlin was—highly educated, well-read and opinionated. It had been the easiest conversation Jared had in a long time. Of course, he had so limited his life that the people who he spoke to were always the same, day in and day out. Merlin didn't feel like an outsider anymore, and Jared was looking forward to talking with him today. The anonymity of the hospital phone made it easier—Jared wasn't trying to fool himself into thinking that he was suddenly and magically cured of the anxiety that haunted every day.

After finishing breakfast, he headed into his office. He planned on getting the last chapters of the new *Fallen* finished and ready for a read through. He liked to go through it once before he sent it to his editor, that way if there was a change in the character that he hadn't noticed while writing he would catch it. Sometimes there needed to be a little more or less in a chapter. It didn't take him long, and he was weeks ahead of deadline for a change. Opening the page, he read it over and started writing. The panic from the day before was gone and before long he had several pages done. Lunchtime came and went, and he was still writing, it was the best run he'd had in a long time and it felt good. He didn't stop until his phone chimed with an email.

Jared picked up his phone and clicked on it.

*Hey, I managed to talk Jeff into springing me, so I am at home. If you want to call, the house phone is 360.555.7781. My cell is 253.555.1805. I have been confined to bed and promised I would stay at least for today. If you don't want to call, I totally understand. Merlin.*

He looked at his phone, staring at the numbers. It was one thing to call an anonymous line at the hospital, but now Merlin would have his number. It would mean that he could... Jared stopped himself, remembering what his therapist said the first time reaching out to people came up. *"If it worries you, make your number private."* There was no way to track his phone, he lived on the top floor with keyed elevator, behind double doors. It would be okay.

Jared held his phone reading the note again. There was forced casualness that came through on the second read. It sounded like it didn't matter one way or the other if he called, but Merlin had given him two phone numbers. Even though they had talked for a long time the day before, the reason Merlin was hospitalized was carefully skirted with Merlin saying it was just his friend's worry that led him to be there—but he'd been in the hospital three days before Jeff emailed. Something was definitely wrong. Jared glanced up at the time, nervous flutters starting in his chest as he thought about calling. His hand was shaking the longer he thought about it. Taking a deep breath, he called up the dial pad on his phone. He had managed to call the day before. It was Merlin. They'd actually been talking for a long time. No one could trace his phone, even if they wanted to. He was safe.

It took six tries before he managed to hit "call" on the phone. On the third ring he was getting ready to hang up, his anxiety starting to spiral out of control when a gruff voice answered. "Hello?"

"I told you not to answer it, Jeff," Merlin's voice said from the background.

"Hello?" the voice—Jeff—said again.

"Hi, this is, um, Pike," Jared said, trying to still the tremors in his voice.

"Pike! It's nice to meet you! I'm Jeff and I will hand the phone over the grouchiest man in the world. Thanks for calling." There was a pause then "Take the damn phone before I make you eat it."

"I'm not on solids," Merlin replied. "Pike?" he said into the phone a moment later.

"Yeah, hey," Jared answered, his voice still sounding unsure. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he said lamely, then wanted to pull the words back.

"No, Jeff was just trying to convince me to go back and I won't." The last part seemed to be aimed away from the phone.

"Back?" Jared asked.

"To the hospital. All they do is shove needles in me, serve me shit for food and wake me up every time I go to sleep. I can get all that at home," he grumbled.

"I don't know about that, it takes special skill to make that swill they serve in the hospital," Jared replied with a laugh. "I remember a turkey ala king that I am not even sure was meat, let alone turkey."

"I stuck to toast and Italian ices."

"You just don't appreciate gourmet dining," Jared said.

"I must not. I tend to like food that doesn't make me nauseous until *after* I eat it. The first night I was there, they brought me something gray with gravy on top and some mushy peas with green gelatin for dessert. Why is it always the green kind?"

"And you didn't like that? I'm shocked!" Jared joked. "Rubbery hospital gelatin with unknown whipped white stuff on top is served at the finest restaurants in the world."

"That's probably why I stick with the Thai place in Tacoma."

"I like Thai food. I think I finally have my pad thai down pretty good."

"You make pad thai?" Merlin said incredulously. "From scratch?"

"I do buy the rice noodles, but yeah, I make it myself." Jared wondered why that was such a big deal.

"Jeff's a good cook, but he shies away from stuff like that, he says it's way easier just to stop on the way home from work if we want Thai."

"It probably is, but cooking helps me wind down. I like figuring out recipes, too. Sometimes I get it right the first time, sometimes it's a mess for weeks. There is this little place in the University district that makes these amazing cakes. It took three weeks of experimenting to get them right."

"Three weeks?" Merlin asked.

"About that. The attempts were tasty enough, they just didn't taste right. So, I kept trying until I made it work."

"That's dedication to the cause."

"Yeah and it's easier than having them delivered." Jared stopped dead, his heart pounding. The place he was talking about didn't deliver. Would Merlin...?

"At least you can cook. Last time I tried I caught the oven on fire. How was I supposed to know you had to put holes in the pie crust or it exploded? Jeff pretty much banned me after that." Merlin laughed. "I guess I can't blame him for the fact that the recipe didn't say 'will explode in oven' on it, even though it was his stupid cookbook."

"Cookbooks try to catch the unwary and lead them astray."

"This one did," Merlin agreed. "When we have take-out, I buy it to make up for all the food I don't cook."

"Seems fair." Jared relaxed. Merlin didn't see anything wrong with having something delivered, and there was no way he could tie a delivery from a bakery to Jared. Maybe his therapist was right, and he did worry about some things too much. "What?" he asked, when he realized Merlin had said something and he'd missed it.

"I said did you see the *History's Mystories* that was on this morning?"

"I missed it this morning," Jared replied. "I caught it on the first run last night, though. I have to keep up on my quality TV programming."

"Can you believe it?"

"They made some better than average leaps of logic this time."

"I know," Merlin said, laughing. He started talking about the show. The conversation moved to other things books, television, the weather, the forests around the cities. There had been a report of a Bigfoot sighting outside of Issaquah. They talked about nothing, really, the minutiae of life, but it was about so much more. Jared realized that he was relaxed talking to someone for the first time since *The Day It Happened*. He always worried a bit about Charlie and his therapist, even though he knew they were "safe". Some days, it just didn't feel safe, like the day before when he'd been unable to open the door for Charlie, yet in the middle of that panic, he had called Merlin.

"Jeff's here badgering me about eating, Pike. First, he springs me, then one little episode and he wants to haul me back and now he is bringing me soup."

Jared looked up at the clock, it was almost seven. He couldn't believe he'd been on the phone for almost three hours. "That's okay, I should make something to eat too. Don't forget to watch the new *Battleground: Cupcake Superstar Edition* tonight."

"Thanks for reminding me, talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I'll call when I get my read through done," Jared answered and froze. Panic coursing through his veins. Read through, that meant he could be...

"Sure. I am going to try and sneak a picture of the Evil Hummingbird tomorrow. It was great talking. Thanks."

"Anytime." Jared smiled as he hit "end call". Except for a few snags, he had let the conversation just flow. His panic was down at a low ebb for most of it, and the things that he was sure were going to give him away were just skipped over like it was a common topic for Merlin.

It made him wonder about Merlin, who he was and why, even now, they hadn't exchanged names.





## Eleven

It was getting late, the house was quiet. Jensen could hear the soft sound of rain against the window. In the last three weeks it had turned cold, and every once in a while, the soft rush was punctuated with a staccato clatter as ice hit the glass. He'd been listening to the rain since he got off the phone with Pike. The phone calls were now twice or three times daily, they still emailed now and then, but Pike had started calling during the day and they always ended up talking for an hour. Along the way, Jensen had pieced together the fact that Pike was an author of some kind, although what he wrote was never really discussed. Jensen never called him on it, there were a few subjects they just ignored. Pike was a writer, Jensen was ill, those two things never went further. They talked about everything else.

Sometimes—like now—Jensen wondered how he had become friends with a man whose real name was still unknown. Then again, Pike didn't know, or ask for, Jensen's name. It struck him as odd, but it helped having someone to talk to. Jeff was worrying less about leaving him alone, and Jensen had to admit it was nice to talk to someone. It was the first time he had really reached out since he lost his job—and realized how many people he thought were friends really weren't. The anonymity with Pike made the friendship more solid, or that's how he felt. There was no need to force the relationship, it had just grown organically and was now a fixture in his daily life.

He needed it more and more.

The myriad symptoms were beginning to get out of control. His everyday pain had increased, leaving him exhausted by noon most days. Jensen was beginning to hate the Big Book. Jeff was getting it down daily, adding something to it. It was hard to hide things when they were getting out of control. There were one or two things that he had managed to keep from Jeff, but he knew they would come out sooner or later. For now, Jensen was trying to convince himself that he could keep things under control. He absently scratched the scab on his leg—then again, maybe he should just own up to where that wound came from, or at least where he thought it came from.

"I said, dinner is here!" Jeff's voice penetrated his musings. Jensen looked up, Jeff was frowning at him from the door to the kitchen.

"Oh, sorry," Jensen said sheepishly, and wondered how long he'd been sitting there listening to the rain.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I was thinking," Jensen replied with a smile.

"Thinking?" Jeff grinned. "Not sure I like the sound of that thinking stuff."

"What smells good?"

"I ordered a pizza, we haven't had one lately and the cinnamon dessert pizza was free."

"What's up?" Jensen asked, watching his friend bustle around the kitchen.

"Nothing," Jeff said quickly—too quickly.

"Jeff? What?"

"I, um, I've been asked to give the Saturday speech at the conference."

"That's great!"

"Jensen..."

"What?"

"I would have to be gone for two days. There's no way I can attend the things they have slated without an overnight."

"I don't understand. You've been planning this for six months!" Jensen narrowed his eyes and looked at Jeff. "Haven't you?"

"I was, but then," Jeff trailed off.

"Me. You cancelled because of me!?! No, you don't get to stop because of me." He took a breath, and plowed on before he was interrupted. "I am not letting you cancel something this important because of me! Dammit, Jeff, you said yourself your research could help a lot of people! And if they are still trying to get you to speak after you cancelled, they think so too, so just go."

"Jensen..."

"No. Just no."

"What happens if..."

"Nothing will happen, Jeff. You'll only be gone overnight. I'm not some kid that can't be left on his own," Jensen snapped, his voice harsh. "I'll barricade myself in my room with the coffee machine so way I can't wander off."

Jeff took a deep breath, Jensen waited, wondering what his friend would say. "I don't like it."

"I know. I'm not all that excited about being alone overnight." Jensen stopped, he hadn't meant to say that.

"Maybe you could come? There should be space on the airplane, even this late."

“No, I don’t like to fly, you know that. And I…” he paused, considering what to say, but Jeff would find out anyway. “I’m not feeling up to traveling. I’ve had chest pain for the last week. Nothing serious, just an ache.”

“Chest pain?” Jeff demanded, frowning at him.

“I called Dale, he wasn’t in, but I talked with Babs. She said to keep an eye on it, if it’s still bad Monday, we need to go in. Since I had that episode a couple of months ago, she thinks it’s the same thing. She did say she would talk it over with Dale, and if he felt there was something different, I would have to go in.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I know, I don’t either, but if you give up this conference, I’ll feel like a worm.”

Jeff looked at him for a long moment, then sighed. Jensen wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad sign. He watched as the other man finished setting the table. There was tension in his back that showed he was struggling with something. If he was honest with himself, Jensen was worried about spending the time in the house alone. He wandered at night, and every night was a little terror filled because he never knew if it was just a dream or if it was a dream with the added extra of wandering the house. Scratching the scab on his leg again, he wondered if he should mention that to Jeff. It was something new for the much-hated Big Book. It had only happened once, so Jensen was hoping it was a fluke, but the fact that he had taken a knife to the mole on his leg while he was “sleeping” was worrying. It could wait until after the conference.

“Fine,” Jeff said, “but you keep your phone with you at all times and if you do not answer I will call 911. Maybe I can get someone to stop by.”

“You are not having anyone in to babysit me like I am a goddamn child!” Jensen slammed his hand down on the table surprising himself as well as Jeff. “Sorry, I just want normal now and then.”

“Of course you do.” Jeff nodded. “Will you keep your phone with you?”

“Yes, and I’ll stay in my room most of the time if that makes you feel better.”

“It does.”

By the time Thursday arrived, Jeff was a bundle of nerves—partially because of the conference and partially because he was still unsure about leaving. Jensen sighed as he watched the rain slide down the window. He knew Jeff was worried about him, but the nagging for the last two days was almost too much. They had angry words the night before, with Jeff texting an “I’m sorry” sometime around midnight.

Jensen saw movement out of the corner of his eye. The hummingbird was back to mock him. The feeder would need to be refilled in the next day or two. He’d discovered several years before that his nemesis hummingbird didn’t migrate—the Pacific Northwest had a variety that could eat bugs and didn’t leave. It gave the creature more time to work on frustrating Jensen. It had stopped by the feeder twice in the last hour, but each time it had waited just long enough for Jensen to get the camera up before it zipped away.

The phone ringing pulled him from his reverie. He glanced at the caller ID and grabbed his headset. Conversations with Pike tended to go longer than an hour and the headset made it so much easier. “Hey,” he said as he slipped the headset into place.

“How’s it going?”

“Okay. The bastard has spent the whole morning playing mind games with me.”

Pike laughed. “Maybe you should try not thinking about taking a picture. Maybe it can read your mind.”

“That must be it!” Jensen said, laughing. “It’s got to be something like that, the little bastard.”

“Did you see last night’s episode of the *Paranormal Watch*? They covered animal/human telepathy.”

“I watched it. Thanks to Jeff, I missed that segment, but I did catch the one on the wolf boy of Argentina.”

“Do you think we have an unhealthy pattern of TV shows?” Pike asked.

“I don’t think so, I think we are very discerning in the crap we choose to watch,” Jensen replied. “And I get lots of good ideas for food from the cooking shows. I’m just not allowed to cook anything.”

“Is Jeff still mad about the muffins?” Pike laughed. “You think he’d be happy only the baking pan was ruined.”

“And I replaced the pan! It’s not my fault the leavening went crazy.”

“You don’t think adding two tablespoons instead of two teaspoons had anything to do with it?”

“I thought it would work better,” Jensen replied. “Last time I tried, they were little banana flavored hockey pucks.”

“Maybe you could start a business making hockey pucks for little league? They could eat them when they were done?”

“Good idea, except I am not allowed to touch the oven—even for pizza—ever, ever, ever again.” Jensen laughed. “I’ll just stick to buying take-out I guess. I seem to have no cooking genes at all.”

"It's all about patience," Pike said. "When I first started, it wasn't pretty. Okay, I never caught anything on fire, but the food was kind of different. Eventually, I got the hang of it, and started figuring out restaurant dishes I liked. It's nice."

"Nice as long as there is no disaster."

"Your food disasters are of a higher order of magnitude than mine. Mostly mine are 'it doesn't taste exactly right'."

"I guess I am particularly skilled at culinary disasters. I have to have some gifts."

"Don't forget hummingbird telepathy," Pike reminded him.

"Right, and that. The little bastard."

A large crash sounded from the first floor followed by "just a plate!" from Jeff. "Jeff's breaking things again."

"What?"

"He's worried about being gone, and he's taking out his worry on the dishes. It happens now and then. I know he's worried, but this conference is important. His research really needs to be out there, and the conference is such a great way to do it."

"He's only going to be gone for a day or so?"

"He couldn't get a flight for Saturday night, so he can't be back till Sunday and he's back to wanting to pull out. He needs to get away from here, and he needs to go to this conference. I considered drugging him, but then I couldn't figure out how to get him onto the airplane without anyone mentioning it."

"Yeah, usually if you are afraid to fly you wait until you are on the airplane to pass out. I had a friend in college who had to get a tranquilizer every time he flew home. Drove me nuts the one time I traveled with him to an event, he was sound asleep for the whole flight, and groggy most of the first night. I had to do everything!" Pike huffed.

"I am not big on travel anymore. It's gotten uncomfortable." Jensen stopped. That was more personal information than usually crept into their conversations.

"I don't travel much anymore either." There was a weird silence for a moment. "Hey! It's time for *Cryptozoology Files*! They are going after a chupacabra today!"

"I almost forgot!" Jensen grabbed the remote and changed the channel.

"Rick's back!" Pike said. "That means it should be a great episode."

"Only because he freaks out easier than the rest of them."

"You have to have at least one believer, Merlin, or a show like this would end pretty fast," Pike chided. "You need the sceptics for the same reason."

"Whatever it is, it is entertaining," Jensen agreed. The weird silence was gone, and they settled in to watch the show—after it was over they dissected it until *Uncovering Lost Cities* came on and they started a friendly argument over early settlements in Europe and UFOs. When Jeff came in the room, Jensen was surprised to find that several hours had passed. "Jeff's here, I think dinner is ready."

"Mine is ready to come out of the oven. What time does Jeff leave tomorrow?"

"Around three, his flight is at five."

"Okay, talk to you tomorrow. Don't forget to catch the repeat of hummingbird telepathy tonight!"

"I won't, talk to you tomorrow. Night, Pike."

"Night, Merlin." There was a small pause like he was going to add something, then stopped. "Talk tomorrow," he repeated and broke the connection.

"Jensen..." Jeff started, a frown on his face.

"I told you twenty times *today*, Jeff. You are going to the conference no matter what. So, live with it."

"I don't have to like it." Jeff grumbled and left the room. After a minute Jensen followed him down the stairs, by the time he reached the kitchen Jeff's mood seemed to have improved. A call interrupted Jeff partway through, but when he came back he was smiling. Jensen hoped it was good news on one of his tough cases. Jeff needed good news.

## Twelve

The scent of dinner was filling the apartment when Jared got off the phone with Merlin. He was still surprised at how quickly time passed while they were talking. It had been years—long before *The Day It Happened*—since he'd been able to let himself relax and enjoy a phone call. *Or a friendship*, he thought as he took the food out of the oven. His last serious relationship of any kind was in college, a thousand years ago—or so it seemed. He'd hooked up some before *The Day It Happened*, but he used most of his energy to write and dealing with humanity tended to quell the energy to write. He had to pick one or the other and decided on writing. He was still unsure if that decision made his life after easier or not. Maybe if he'd had friends... He stopped that line of thinking. It did no good and his therapist would just lecture him again.

While he was setting the table and serving the food, he thought back over the conversation with Merlin. There was something wrong. He could feel it, if pressed he couldn't explain how he knew, but he did. Jeff's trip had come up several times and Jared sensed there was a lot more going on than Merlin had let on. Of course, he knew Merlin was ill, but how ill was never really covered. They talked about everything—almost—and the unknown *why* Jeff was afraid to leave worried him. After staring into his food for a few minutes hoping it would have an answer, he made a decision.

Since that first phone call to Merlin, Jared had changed. He could feel it in his bones. The panic wasn't gone, the terror still stalked some nights but...but he'd made it to the coffee stand three floors down with Charlie five times now. He had ordered a pizza—not through Charlie. His therapist was thrilled. Maybe...

Maybe...

Taking a slow breath to calm his rapidly increasing pulse, he called up the first email from Jeff and dialed the man's phone before his courage gave in to the panic. It took three tries, but he finally managed to get connected. His heart was in his throat. Would Merlin be angry? Would Jeff?

"Yeah?" Jeff's voice was gruff when he answered.

"It's, um, Pike. Can we talk for a few minutes?" Jared asked, hearing the small tremble in his voice.

"Sure, hang on," Jeff said. There was a rustling and the sound of a door shutting. "What's up?"

"Uh..." Now that he was here, Jared wasn't as sure as he had been when he hit the call button. "Merlin said you were going out of town and you were worried and not going to go." Did that even make sense?

"I am. I don't like leaving him alone for more than a day. It's been a long time since I've been gone more than overnight. His health is worse, I'm worried about him being alone in his own head for three days. You are planning to call, aren't you?" Jeff asked, sounding desperate.

It was a tone Jared knew all too well. Something he understood without needing more words. Jeff was close to panicking about leaving. It was there in his voice, sounding like unshed tears. *Which do have a sound*, Jared thought as his chest tightened in reaction to the other man's pain. Without his brain engaging, he blurted out, "I don't have a car." He stopped abruptly as his brain caught up.

"What?" Jeff asked, sounding unsure.

"I don't have a car," Jared repeated lamely, wishing he would think a little harder before he engaged his mouth sometimes.

"A car?" Jeff paused. "Are you saying you would come here?" The hope in his voice was enough to drive Jared's panic into the background. "I leave for the airport late afternoon, but I could come get you...um...if that's..." This time he sounded panicked and unsure.

"Can you be here at ten?" Jared heard himself answering.

"Give me your address."

"Sure," he said, trying to push pictures of a madman with a knife at his door. He'd been getting so much better, but had he just overstepped his ability to cope?

"Thank you!" The warmth in Jeff's voice encouraged him to stammer out his address. "I'll see you then!"

"I'll be here."

Jared broke the connection and wondered what the hell he'd just done.

The sun was shining on the balcony as Jared tried to eat breakfast. As the clock got closer to ten, it got harder to think about anything but a stranger at the door. Leaving with a stranger. Someone who might... He stopped. Jeff probably wasn't a murderer. After all, Merlin had lived with him for years and he hadn't been murdered yet. That thought was enough to make Jared laugh at himself. How long had his therapist been trying to convince him not everyone wanted to kill him? It only takes one was his standard answer, but the last few months—since that first exchange with Merlin—he sensed something shifting. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he had to be getting better, finally.

The clock chimed ten and his mouth went dry. Maybe he wasn't better. Getting up, he carried his cup and plate into the kitchen and washed them. His hands were shaking. He looked down at them, the dark scar on his right hand where he had blocked the fatal blow or so the doctors told him.

The intercom buzzed. Jared froze. It sounded again, and he walked to the door, stopped and stared at the box. When it buzzed a third time, he punched the button. "Yes?" His voice cracked.

"It's Jeff."

"I'll let you in, then stop at the desk and asked them to key for the penthouse."

"Penthouse? Be right there!"

Jared hit the lock for the door, then stepped back. The shaking in his hands had moved up his arms and into his chest. It was getting hard to breathe. Someone was coming. Jeff would be in the elevator now and any minute he'd be at the door. *I can't do it!* Jared wondered what he'd been thinking—then he remembered the panic in the other man's voice, the relief when he knew Merlin wouldn't be alone. When the bell on the outside door rang, he jumped. He looked at the door knob, how long had it taken him the first time Charlie had come up? One deep breath, a second and the locks were open, another and he was standing in the entry way by the heavy front door. Staying focused on his breathing let him get the locks on that door open and he turned the knob.

A dark-haired man stood there, a smile on his face. "Hi! I'm Jeff," he said.

"Jared. Uh, Pike," he answered. "I have to grab my things." Jared led the way into the apartment, his panic back. He was trying not to look to obvious as he kept close to the wall—just in case. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked, turning back to look at Jeff.

"No, I'm fine. But I might take advantage of your view, if that's okay?"

"Yes!" Jared said a little too loudly, trying to hide his relief. "I'll be right back."

He walked into his room. He had his backpack ready, his electronics bag with his tablet and charging cables clipped on top. He had debated taking his computer, wondering if he would be able to write while he was gone and decided against it. *Gone*. The word bounced in his head, back and forth, winding up his panic again. It was hard to swallow, he sat down in the chair by his bed and put his head in his hands, trying to breathe through the panic, but it was spiraling so fast he couldn't get it under control. A tear forced its way out and trickled down his face. Why had he done this?

"Hey," Jeff said, his voice soft, gentle. Jared peeked through his hands and saw the man standing at the door, his hands raised to show they were empty. "Breathe," he said in that same soft voice. Jared took a shaky breath, head still in his hands. "Good! It's okay, Jared."

Taking another breath, Jared raised his head and looked at Jeff. "Sorry," he stammered.

"It *is* okay," Jeff said, still not moving, his hands still in the air.

"Uh."

"I'm not here to hurt you."

"I know," Jared answered quickly. "I know." He shook his head, the long years of seclusion pressing against him.

"Is this the first time you've left since you were injured?"

"I've been to the doctor." Jared met his eyes. "In the last few weeks, I've made it to the coffee stand a few floors down." There was something about Jeff that radiated calm. "I even ordered a pizza last Friday, Buddy, the doorman, brought it up."

"How long has it been since you ordered pizza?"

"Like that? Since The Day It Happened," he said, putting the emphasis he always put on it.

Jeff nodded. "Makes sense. You don't know who might be at the door." He lowered his hands slowly, but didn't move. "I had a friend when I was an undergrad. He was mugged on the way home one night. It took him a long time to trust anyone. He ended up moving home for several years, his folks had a farm in Eastern Oregon and there was no one around for miles."

"I came directly here from the hospital," Jared heard himself say. "Except for the doctor—which usually takes enough valium to turn me into a zombie—I haven't left since it happened."

"We live on the plateau, at the edge of the foothills, in a large Victorian with its own lake. It's a quiet there. We have a large garden and five acres beyond that. Jensen joked there was a good field of fire when he bought the place." Jeff laughed.

"Yeah, he told me that one night when we were talking." Jared smiled. "It's okay?" He hated how helpless he sounded.

"It will be." Jeff smiled. "Are you up to this?" He sounded genuinely concerned.

"But you're worried about Merlin," Jared said.

"I am, I won't lie, but I understand if you aren't ready." Jeff seemed to deflate for a moment as if the weight he was carrying almost crushed him. "I really do," he went on. "I, um, I remember when it happened."

"Four years." Jared looked down at his scarred hand. "Maybe it's time," he muttered to himself. After a moment he stood and grabbed his bags. "Let's go before I wind up again."

"I parked out front, I cheated and used the handicap tag." Jeff started to the door, making sure he stayed in front of Jared.

It felt strange closing the doors to the apartment behind him and carefully locking the locks on both doors. He keyed opened the elevator and pressed the button for the first floor. His hand was shaking again. He hadn't been all the way out the door of the building in years, except for those very few trips to the doctor. The panic was fluttering just behind his sternum, he could feel it starting to wind its way through him again. Before he worked himself into an attack, the doors opened on the main floor. Jeff stepped out first, waiting for Jared, but always a little ahead of him.

As he walked out of the elevator, Jared noticed they had redecorated the building—when he had moved in it had a quasi-modern feeling, but now the lobby looked like an Old World hotel. It had a comfortable feeling he really liked. How long had it been that way? He couldn't remember how it looked on his trips to the doctor, he was too well medicated.

Jeff led the way out the main door, headed towards a dark blue SUV, and walked to the driver's side. The passenger door was unlocked. Jared threw his bags into the back and sat down, closing the door and locking it. Jeff got in and turned the engine on, glancing over with a look of concern. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," Jared answered truthfully.

"That's not a bad answer," Jeff said with a grin as he pulled into traffic. "Would you like to get a coffee before we hit the freeway?"

"There's a drive through around the corner, Charlie brings me pastries from there sometimes."

"Is this it?" Jeff pulled into the drive through when Jared nodded. "What's your poison?"

"Caramel latte."

"Hummingbird coffee. Why can't anyone just drink coffee?" Jeff laughed as he ordered.

"I usually do at home. When Charlie brings me something, I get a latte."

"Who's Charlie? If you don't mind me asking?" Jeff handed him a coffee cup, put his own in the cup holder and pulled into traffic.

"He runs errands for me. I never thought he'd still be around, after all these years. I've actually relied on him more and more. The farther I get, the harder it is."

"Except this last little bit, you said you ordered pizza?"

"Yeah, since that first call to Merlin, things have changed. It's funny, that first call."

"Why's that?" Jeff's voice was gently encouraging.

"The day before you sent the email was the mess at NeedleCon. I saw it on the news. Of course, they made it look horrible—not that it wasn't—but what really struck me was the paramedics working on someone in front of a poster for the new *Fallen* novel. I had the worse attack in a long time. I was still there, locked in that mindset, so caught up in it I couldn't let Charlie all the way into the apartment."

"Sounds reasonable."

"But I got the email from you and I *called someone*. It had literally been years since I picked up the phone to call someone new. There was something in your email that made me want to call." He shrugged.

"I hope you don't think that was overstepping, but I was desperate. Sometimes he spirals when things get bad physically. And I know he is hiding something." Jeff sighed. "I didn't know what to do. He'd stopped talking to everyone. He grunted at me. I was really worried."

Jared waited for more, but Jeff had stopped. His face was sad. "I'm glad you did," Jared said. "It's made a difference."

"It has for him too, he's better after he talks to you. Something is going on though," Jeff repeated. "He's hiding something, but I haven't figured out what it is yet. Maybe he'll talk to you, I don't know."

"We'll see. I grabbed some of my best recipes and maybe I'll get him to help."

"You'll end up with a mess," Jeff said, laughing.

"Wouldn't be the first time food went a little wrong for me," Jared replied.

"Look," Jeff said, his voice gruff. "I know now why you've kept your name out of the conversations. It hasn't hurt anything, don't worry about that. In fact, I think it did the opposite because he is more open since you two started talking. But, Jared, before we get there I have to tell you."

"What?"

"He's Jensen Ackles."

“Jensen Ackles?” Jared repeated absently. He remembered the scandal, cheered when the professor was cleared. Charlie had kept him up to date on it. “I used his books as a basis for the Devil’s Detectives,” he added. “We actually talked briefly when my agent contacted him. It wasn’t much just ‘if you need more let me know’. Small world.”

“You don’t have a problem with it?”

“With what?” Jared was confused.

“If you have to ask, then there’s nothing to worry about.” Jeff smiled at him. “Nothing at all.”



## Thirteen

The house was quiet as Jensen made his way downstairs. The sun was streaming in the kitchen window, and he could see a group of finches gathered around his birdfeeders. Unlike the hummingbird, the finches were more than happy to have their picture taken. He popped a pod in the coffeemaker, put milk and sugar in his cup and got it under the spout just as the coffee started to flow.

When it was done, he carried it into the living room. He knew he should eat something, but he doubted he could keep it down. While he would never mention it to Jeff, the idea of being alone for almost three days was worrying him. The things he hadn't mentioned to Jeff were scary when he thought about all those hours in his own head. Nights were bad enough, knowing Jeff was there in case anything went wrong.

Turning on the TV, he flipped around and didn't find anything to distract him. He put it on a repeat of *Mysterious History* and grabbed his tablet. He was working through the levels on a game he'd found for free the night before. It wasn't as ad heavy as a lot of the other free games he played, so it was easier to lose himself for an hour or two.

He heard the garage door opening and set the tablet down. Taking a deep breath, he got up and carried his cup into the kitchen, debating making Jeff a cup, so it would be ready when he came in.

That's when he heard Jeff laugh. The door from the garage opened and Jeff stepped in, a smile on his face. "What no coffee?"

"All ready to go, just waiting so it wouldn't go sour," Jensen said.

"In other words, you were watching crap on TV and playing games and just got to the kitchen?"

"Pretty much," Jensen replied as he opened the cupboard full of coffee mugs.

"How do you take yours?" Jeff asked. Jensen had no idea what to make of that.

"Strong, milk and sugar," someone said. The voice was familiar.

Jensen grabbed another cup and tried to hide his sigh. Jeff apparently had found a sitter. It would probably be for the best, but if Jeff had brought Regina from the psych department, Jensen would probably end up killing her before the weekend was over. The last time she was there, she spent two days trying to convince Jensen his illness was all in his head. Without turning around, he dropped a pod in the coffeemaker and put a sugar cube in the mug.

"Can I have two?" Whoever it was, it definitely wasn't Regina. She had a fairly low voice for a woman, but the person who spoke had a masculine voice. Jensen dropped another cube in the cup, turned around—and found himself staring at the owner of the voice. He was... No, that couldn't be right.

"Hi," the man said. "Um..." He glanced around, looking like he was checking for escape routes. "I hope you don't mind. I called Jeff after we got off the phone last night."

Jensen frowned, his brain trying to make that statement match up with the tall man in front of him. He recognized him of course, not just from the news, but because Jeff owned every single book Jared Padalecki had ever written. "Pike?"

"Yeah, hi," he repeated. Jensen saw him swallow nervously.

"Give him his coffee and go sit down, Jensen," Jeff said sternly. Pike looked from Jeff to Jensen with a frown. "Never mind." Jeff picked up the mug, poured milk in it and handed it to Pike. He then gently shoved Jensen aside to make his own.

Jensen took his coffee and walked into the living room aware that Pike was following him. He seemed so freaked, all Jensen could think was he knew about the scandal and might be one of the many people who still thought that he had... He sat down with an ache in his chest. The friendship that had come to mean so much would be destroyed but Kurtis and his friends' lies.

"You don't have to stay," Jensen said, aware of the bitterness in his voice.

Pike frowned, opened his mouth and closed it again. He took a slow breath and ran his hand through his hair. Jensen noticed the scar on it. "If you want me to go," Pike said, his eyes bright. "I'll go." His shoulders bowed, his face was white and his hands were trembling. Jensen knew the signs all too well.

"I just meant since I'm me," Jensen added.

"You? You? Why would I leave?"

"You have to know who I am," Jensen snapped.

"And?" Pike looked confused, then his face cleared. "That little shit was lying from the start. Anyone with half a brain had to see that. I couldn't believe it! I was on the way to..." He paused, then continued. "I read it in the paper on the plane. I was going write a letter of support, but," he shrugged, "that weekend turned out a little worse than I planned. The scandal was over and dead before I was recovered enough to do anything." Pike stopped and blinked, like he'd surprised himself. He set his cup down on the table and held out his hand. "Jared, Jared Padalecki."

Jensen took his hand. It was cold and trembling. "Jensen Ackles." He smiled. "Sit down."

Pike—Jared—Jensen corrected himself, sat down and looked nervously around the room. "Nice place," Jared said

"I like it, I can watch the lake and gardens from my bedroom, which is getting increasingly important," he said more bitterly than he intended.

"I can watch the shipping from my apartment. I live in the penthouse, so I have a pretty good view."

"I bet! We have a widow's walk on the top of the house. It's a nice place to sit in the summer, there's always a breeze. It's about as high as I like to go. I don't do man made heights."

"What?" Jared picked up his cup and sipped his coffee. Jensen noticed he was looking less freaked.

"I don't mind mountains or cliffs or things like that—as long as I'm walking." He laughed. "But buildings and stuff, not so much. I've lived in the Northwest off and on my whole life and have never been up in the Space Needle."

"I haven't been up in the Space Needle since college. For some reason the penthouse doesn't bother me. Maybe I just haven't thought about how tall the building is."

"Maybe," Jensen smiled. "I'll leave the tall buildings to you."

Jared laughed. It sounded like the laugh of the person Jensen had spent hours talking to. He grinned back. The awkwardness was disappearing, Jared seemed less nervous. "I don't know, this is pretty nice. Oh! Is that the bastard?"

Jensen turned so he could look out the window. The hummingbird was sitting on the feeder. "Yes, that's the red-throated bastard," he said sourly. "See him mocking me?"

"I can see that." Jared laughed again. "I'm amazed they hang around all winter."

"When we moved in, I noticed him in the flowers, then late fall I saw him again and was surprised, I went into the hardware store and there was an old guy working in back who knew all about hummingbirds. He told me we have one species that doesn't migrate and even eats bugs. If I'd known then what I know now about the little bastard I wouldn't have gotten the feeder."

"You would too," Jeff said, coming into the room. "Don't let him fool you he has a heart of mush."

"Gee, thanks," Jensen said.

"Don't worry about that," Jared said. "I made sure someone would come in and make sure there was food for the crow while I was gone." He stopped and turned white.

"Jared?" Jeff said softly.

"I'm okay. Um, where can I put my bags?" He stood.

"Top of the stairs first room on the right," Jeff replied.

"Be right back, then maybe I'll make some lunch?" Jared didn't wait for an answer. He walked into the kitchen and Jensen heard his steps on the stairs a moment later.

"Explains a lot," Jensen said to Jeff.

"Yeah. Nice you two sort of knew each other before things happened."

"Sort of knew?"

"You talked to him when he used your research?"

"Yeah, that might make it easier. But you can ask him to autograph the books for you before you bother to bug me." Jensen smiled. "I think we'll be okay."

"I think you will too," Jeff said with the first genuine smile in three days. "Both of you."

Two hours later, Jensen waved to Jeff as he got into the airport shuttle. Lunch had gone well. Jared seemed to relax, right up until the driver had knocked on the door. Jensen watched until the shuttle was out of sight before going back into the house. He heard the clink of dishes and headed towards the kitchen.

"He's safely on his way," he said as he walked into the room. "For a minute there, I thought he was going to back out."

"What do you mean?" Jared asked as he loaded the dishwasher.

"The last time he was gone for more than a night..." He trailed off, the memories were still vague. He remembered not feeling well and lying down on the couch to wait for Jeff to get home. The next clear memory was waking up in the hospital.

"What?" Jared looked up from the plates he was rearranging in the machine.

"I'd caught a virus that decided it wanted to be bad. I didn't know I was seriously ill, I just felt like crap, you know?"

Jared laughed. "The 'kill me now' cold?"

"Yes!" Jensen said fervently. "I swear colds are worse than anything."

"They are! I haven't had many since The Day It Happened," he said, pausing briefly on the last four words. "But the last one, I just laid on the couch watching an end of the world marathon left from all the 2012 programs."

"I think I watched that too—or when it was on again."

"Inconvenient things didn't end in 2012, after they put in all that money on those shows."

"Did you notice that one guy disappeared from *Mysterious History* for almost a year after all that?"

"I did! I assumed he was hiding in his bunker and didn't know." Jared chuckled. "He was the only one in that group that was really gung-ho on the end of the world stuff." He added soap to the dishwasher and closed the door.

There was a moment of awkward silence. While he was wondering what to say, Jensen's chest tightened, and he felt the weird fluttery sensation that had landed him in the ER twice. He reached for the counter to steady himself, not trusting his cane. Closing his eyes, he tried to breathe through the pain. "Can you grab the bottle of nitro off the bedside table in my room? It's the one across from yours," he said, surprised at how hard it was to force those words out.

"Are you..." Jared stopped. "I'll be right back."

Jensen heard him leave and a moment later the creak of the stairs. As he leaned against the counter, he hoped he wouldn't have to fight to stay home. Jeff insisted on calling 911, although that didn't always go well.

"Here," Jared said from beside him.

"Kay," Jensen said and held out his hand for one of the small pills. His cane clattered to the floor. The pill started working almost instantly, his ears pounding as his head started to hurt. He'd told Jeff that nitro was a migraine in a bottle and he meant it. Sometimes he debated whether it was worth the headache.

"You need to sit down."

Jensen shook his head, there was no way he was letting go of the counter. It was all that was keeping him upright as the nitro pounded through his body and, even with his eyes closed, bright spots were dancing in front of him.

"Yes, you do," Jared insisted and took his arm, then shifted so Jensen could lean against him and Jared half-carried him to the couch. He pulled the quilt over Jensen and left, he was back a moment later and pressed a glass into Jensen's hands. "Drink, it helps the headache."

"Thanks," Jensen took a sip, the cool fizzy liquid helped ease the pounding in his head. After another sip, he risked opening his eyes. Instead of the usual onslaught of color and light, everything seemed nearly normal. The light was a little too bright, but not so much that he wanted to tear his eyes out. "Thanks a lot!" He smiled at Jared who was hovering by the end of the couch. "How did you know that? I've been taking that shit for months."

Jared looked uncomfortable for a moment, then smiled. "I had a panic attack at the doctors. They thought I was having a heart attack and gave me nitro. The migraine was beyond bad. Once they figured out it wasn't a heart thing, the nurse gave me a little lemon-lime soda. It helped the headache. She said it was the fizz."

"Fizzy things are magic," Jensen replied, carefully sitting up, keeping the blanket over his legs. He always got cold after he took nitro.

"Do I need to call 911?"

"You're asking?" Jensen couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice.

"Yes? I know chest pain is always go to the ER, but..."

"No, please don't call. The nitro has it sort of under control. Once I calm down, it'll help. I think I was more worried about Jeff being gone than I thought."

"Yeah." Jared was still standing beside the coffee table, looking out of place.

"I hate to do this to you on your first day here, but it looks like it's going to be a 'stuck on the couch' day. Do you mind?" Jensen shifted so there was room for Jared at the other end of the large couch. "It's a nice place to watch TV, keep an eye on the bastard, and nap."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, unless you need something to drink?"

"I'm okay for now," Jared said, walking to the far end of the couch and sitting. He seemed unsure, glancing around the room, like he was looking for something.

"There is a *Cryptozoology Files* marathon on, it started about half an hour ago. Is that okay?" Jensen looked at Jared, feeling a little sheepish. "I don't watch stations with news breaks."

"Oh, thank god." Jared sighed and leaned back. "I was trying to figure out how to ask without being rude."

"I haven't watched the news in years," Jensen said. "At first it drove Jeff nuts, but I think he realized it's better for me if I don't. If it's something really important, he'll let me know."

"What qualifies as important?"

"Volcanos, tsunamis," Jensen shrugged. "The return of the Annunaki."

Jared laughed. "Should I be comforted or worried that I know what you're talking about?"

“Hmmm, good question. Oh! Look, it’s South America up next!” He set the remote on the table. “It’s one of my favorites! They haven’t shown it for a year.”

“I love the cave in Peru,” Jared said enthusiastically.

“Is it that one that the camera man freaks and runs off into the desert?”

“In the middle of the night, when humans become prey for things that want to eat them. It’s a smart move on his part, as it turns out.”

“They could never have predicted that there would be something large and angry in the back of that cave.”

Jensen laughed and poked Jared with his toe.

“Isn’t that why they were there?”

“Oh, sure, muddle it with facts.”

Jared laughed, not the nervous chuckle of half an hour before, it was a real laugh. Jensen couldn’t help laughing with him. “Shh! It’s starting,” Jared said, and they both started laughing again.

Jensen was beginning to think Jeff was right. They would be okay.

## Fourteen

The sun was casting pink light across the garden as Jared went into the kitchen to make dinner. He'd been watching TV with Merlin—Jensen, he corrected himself—and had actually relaxed as he sat there. The running commentary and arguments that had filled their phone conversations carried over in person. Jared was surprised at himself when, as the afternoon wore on, he kicked off his shoes and grabbed an afghan from one of the chairs. It was the most comfortable he'd been in a long time, and he was beginning to think maybe his therapist had been right about his isolation. Since the first exchange on [theartistscave.com](http://theartistscave.com) with Merlin, Jared knew he'd been changing. He'd never thought he'd be able to get out of his building, let alone get all the way into the foothills of the Cascades. The only time the panic really started was when he thought about being *away*. If he didn't attach that word to the thought, he was okay.

"Do you want me to order some food?" Jensen asked during a commercial break.

"I'd rather cook," Jared answered quickly. He might be comfortable now, but the thought of a stranger at the door was too much.

Jensen frowned at him. "I'm not sure what's in the kitchen other than cold cereal."

"There's a lot in the fridge. What do you want?" he said, standing and laying the afghan on the couch.

"Whatever you want to make. I'm easy."

Jared laughed. "I'll see what's there." He walked into the kitchen. It was a combination of a glassed breakfast nook and cooking area. There was an island in the center of the room that had several stools on one side of it. The top was granite, flecks of silver shimmering in the light. A huge refrigerator dominated one wall, and across from it there was a stove top, with a double oven beside it. As far as Jared was concerned, it was nearly perfect as kitchens went.

After staring into the fridge for several minutes, he decided to make spaghetti. He pulled out peppers, celery and tomatoes. In the freezer he found a loaf of "buy and bake" bread. He'd opened half of the drawers in the kitchen before he realized a large cabinet door led into the pantry. A basket held onions and another garlic. He carried everything to the cutting board and set it down. It was when he reached for a knife that the reality of being somewhere other than his apartment hit him. He stared at the knives, aware he was shaking and unable to stop.

"Jared?" Jensen was in the door. "Are you okay?"

"I ... I don't ..." It was hard to get the words out. What was he thinking, coming here? He shook his head helplessly.

"When I came home from the hospital, after I'd been fired, I couldn't talk to anyone but Jeff. He even did the talking for the most part while I was still in the hospital. It was weeks before I left the apartment, and that was just to go to the doctor. When I bought this house, I started going outside more. Jeff dragged me to see the symphony and opera. I was always afraid." He laughed bitterly. "I still am most of the time. I write articles, I take pictures and occasionally get out with Jeff. He loves road trips and since that's mostly in the car it's okay." Jensen walked slowly to the far side of the island and pulled out one of the stools. "You're the only person I've really spoken to, other than Jeff, in four years."

"Why?"

"Jeff says I lost trust, maybe he's right. He usually is."

"He seems..." Jared broke off.

"He has a gift, he's very good at what he does, and if he hadn't been with me, I wouldn't be here now. I still have bad days."

"I had one, a really bad one, the first day I called. I'm still not sure how I managed to call." The shaking was easing. "Is spaghetti okay?" If he focused on cooking, he knew a lot of the panic would ease.

"It's one of my favorites. Can I help? I can boil water."

"Sure, but if you catch it on fire..." Jared let the threat hang.

"I haven't managed to burn water yet. Well, except the time I forgot it was on and the pot got a little roasted."

"How did you survive grad school?"

"Take-out. I knew every place that delivered within a five-mile radius. When I started teaching, I met Jeff and he made sure I had a home cooked meal once a week. He said it was unhealthy to be on a first name basis with the delivery people from seven restaurants." Jensen smiled at him and Jared couldn't help noticing how his eyes sparkled when he smiled. The corners of his eyes crinkled and his whole face changed.

"Are you and Jeff?" Jared asked then snapped his mouth closed. Where the hell had that come from?

"Are we?" Jensen frowned at him. "No, Jeff's my best friend, my brother, but that's all. He was dating one of the viola players from the Seattle Symphony a little while ago, but they broke up. He's really too wrapped up in his work to have room for people."

"I understand. Before *The Day It Happened*, I was too busy to date. I was either writing or out promoting." Jared took a deep breath and pulled a knife from the block and started slicing the vegetables. "Even before the books took off, I spent a lot of time tied up in my studies."

"I did, too," Jensen said as he walked to the cupboard by the stove and pulled out a large pot. "I was fast tracking my degrees and it just seemed like every time I did end up going out it ended in disaster." He swallowed hard. "And once I didn't have to go out for a disaster." He put the pot on the stove.

"I told you I was following the case. You were arrested on the Wednesday of HorrorTrifectaCon. I was on the plane when I read about the arrest. I couldn't believe it! I took it kind of personally, since I 'knew' you and based the character of Tony on you a bit."

"Damn!" Jensen grinned.

"What?"

"Jeff said Tony sounded a lot like me, I told him no way, I just wrote a research book. He bet me. I guess I lost that one. Damn, it was a hundred bucks, too." He sighed. "Of course, it's not the money, it's the gloating that will go on."

"Sorry," Jared said with a laugh. "I am not sure I completely planned it that way, it just happened. The more I read your research, the more Tony became sort of you."

"Jeff was sure of it, he devours your books as soon as they're released. Now that he knows it's you..."

"What?" Jared asked, feeling a little beat of panic.

"He will no doubt try and get spoilers. He starts peeking at the last chapter about halfway through. On the most recent book, he actually read the last five pages before he started, since the blurb kind of hinted Gordon wasn't going to make it."

"I wasn't sure about that when they ran it past me. I don't want people to think I'm going to start killing off main characters, but I do want that sense of 'it could happen', you know?"

"Yeah, I do, I've tried to do that. Unfortunately, when writing history, it's harder to keep the suspense going because everyone knows how it turns out."

"I don't know, there have been some pretty big movies based on events everyone knows. Skillet?"

"Right here," Jensen said, setting one on the stove.

"Is it safe to cook this close to you?" Jared asked as he put the vegetables in the pan. "Or will the celery explode and kill us both?"

"I'll sit down at the island, that's usually a safe distance."

"Okay," Jared said, stirring the food. "I was planning on baking the bread too, is that okay?"

"Fresh baked bread is always okay." Jensen slid onto a stool. "Jeff thinks the world would be a better place if every office building had fresh bread scent piped in."

"That makes sense, when I have a rough day—either writing or just a bad day—I'll make bread. I hadn't thought of the scent helping, for me it's usually beating the hell out of the dough." He laughed. "Once or twice, I've taken out a little too much on the dough and the bread comes out odd."

"I tried baking bread once, we won't discuss what happened. I'm still not sure what it was exactly, but not even the rats would eat it," Jensen said, laughing.

"How did that happen?" Jared checked the onions, they were starting to get translucent, so he added the tomatoes. One of his cookbooks claimed that was backwards, but it was the way he'd started doing it and he liked the results.

"It didn't rise." Jensen looked sheepish. "I thought that if I put it in the oven, it might rise after all."

"It didn't?"

"No, it really didn't. It was the size of a baseball and when Jeff tossed it in the garbage, it hit the floor with a nice solid *thunk*."

"You're lucky the tile under the can survived."

"Ha ha. That's what Jeff said. That's starting to smell good."

"Thanks, I'm going to let it simmer while the bread bakes. It should all be done in an hour or so," Jared said, putting the lid on the skillet.

"Perfect, we have time to watch the next *Ancient Aliens*, before we eat."

"Awesome."

The house was quiet as Jared sat in bed reading. Dinner had been enjoyable, the episode of *Ancient Aliens* they had been watching was a good springboard for their conversation and before the meal was ended, Jared felt almost at home. That in and of itself was odd, the fact that he had managed to avoid more than a small whisper of panic all evening was bordering on the amazing. He had discovered that as long as he didn't dwell on the fact he wasn't in his apartment, he was mostly okay.

There had nearly been a moment of almost panic when something loud thumped outside the house. Jensen had been startled as well, and went into the kitchen to peek out onto the deck while Jared kept his hand hovering over his phone. The panic never had a chance to really get going, though, because a few moments after Jensen headed into the other room, he started laughing. Jared went to see what was going on and they ended up watching the antics of three raccoons attempting to raid a bird feeder for almost half an hour.

A soft scrape sounded, and Jared smiled. The first time he'd heard that seemingly ominous screeching sound it had nearly sent him into a spiral. It had been shortly after Jeff left and they'd been watching TV. During a commercial, Jared noticed the sound, and once he heard it, he couldn't ignore it. He finally found his voice and asked Jensen if he heard it—and what it was. Jensen had hauled himself off the couch and led Jared to one of the side windows. There was a huge rose bush outside, and its branches were dragging over the glass. Jensen told him that when he'd first bought the place, it had been a lot smaller. They'd let it take over that half of the garden when they realized it was the best anti-burglary device they could get. Now, listening to the strange screech, it sounded like safety.

There was something about the house that felt safe. Jared wasn't sure exactly what it was, but in some ways, it felt safer than his apartment at the top of a building with a keyed elevator behind double doors. Maybe it was because he'd bought the apartment before *The Day It Happened*, but never lived in it until after and it was full of that experience and emotion. Even though Jensen bought this house after losing his job, it was old, and full of happy memories. Jared firmly believed that things like memory and emotion lived on in buildings and he remembered Jensen telling him that he'd bought the house from the great-grand daughter of the original owner. There were even a few Victorian-style photos on the wall of the house and people who had once lived there hanging in the library. Of course, the fact the house had a dedicated library added to that sense of happiness. Books were special, and had a magic all their own as far as he was concerned. So, even with the creaks and grumbles the house made in the wind, it felt safe.

He was nearly asleep, his head nodding over the book, when he heard the soft squeak Jensen's bedroom door made when it was opened. Jared closed his book and waited. He wanted to use the bathroom before he went to sleep and the light from the bathroom was spilling under his door, so he waited. After ten minutes, he wondered if Jensen had forgotten to turn off the light, or had used it as a light to get down the stairs, rather than turning on the hall lights. Jared slid off the bed and opened his door.

The door to the bathroom was partially open. Jared stepped into the hall and froze—he could see Jensen standing at the sink, his shirt lifted and blood on his hands.

There was blood on his hands

There was blood.

Blood.

Blood.

Blood.

The panic was spiraling up, Jared's breathing was changing, and he was trying to get a handle on it. He'd known Merlin for months, he was not a murderer. He was not bad. He was his friend. He was not bad. He was his friend, he was...

Jared was pressed against the wall, trying to get control of himself, terrified of the blood. The horrible tremble in his guts that had haunted him for four years was back, winding its way through his body. He was less than a second from bolting back into his room, locking himself in and calling the cops when his rational brain stopped him. It fed in information that, even with the panic, made him pause. There was blood, they were alone in the house, there was no animal that could have been hurt. It had to mean Merlin—Jensen—was bleeding. Something was wrong, it had to be that. His rational self was repeating that while the rest of him was screaming silently and trembling inside.

Taking a deep breath, trying to calm the reaction that was filling him, he pushed himself off the wall and stepped towards the bathroom. "Jensen?" he whispered, hearing the fear, the panic, in his own voice. There was no reaction. Jared edged closer and opened the door a little more. Jensen had what looked like a pair of fingernail clippers in his hand and he was about to... "STOP!" Jared demanded before any part of his brain was in gear. "Stop!"

"What?" Jensen blinked, almost like he was waking up, and looked over at Jared, confusion clouding his eyes. "Jared?"

“Hey,” Jared said gently. “Hand those to me, okay?” He kept his voice low, gently coaxing and held out his hand for the clippers. Jensen handed them over almost like he was still mostly asleep. “Good, now, let’s see what’s happened.” Jared stepped all the way into the room. The panic was still there, he could feel it, but it was canceled out by the need to help.

“What?” Jensen blinked again, still confused.

“Here, let me look,” Jared said, turning Jensen around. What he saw nearly made him freak again. It looked like Jensen had cut off at least two small moles with the clippers. Blood was running down his abdomen. Jared grabbed some tissues and pressed them to the wounds. “I’ll get a better look in a sec,” he said, more to himself than to the other man.

“Jared?” Jensen sounded less confused. “What?” And he froze.

“It’s okay.” Jared pulled the tissues away and the blood started flowing immediately.

“No, no it’s not.” Jensen turned to him, defeat and something far darker in his eye. “No it’s not.”



## Fifteen

Jensen was dreaming. It was one of those odd dreams, the ones he'd come to dread, that had that sense of reality to it that made him worry when he woke up. It had been happening more often lately, he wasn't sure why and it was one of the reasons he was afraid to be alone for the weekend, despite his protests to Jeff. Once or twice he'd dreamed about being hurt and woke with an injury. Some of the dreams were darker and more worrisome. He still wasn't sure about the long scratch on his leg, he remembered parts of the dream, but his mind refused to fill in all the details. It was terrifying, most of the time he wasn't sure if he was awake or asleep.

He'd gone to bed feeling better than he'd thought he would on Jeff's first night away. Dinner had been fun, and Jared was an amazing cook. Jeff was a good cook, things were always tasty, but Jared's cooking was a level beyond that. The spaghetti tasted like it was from the Italian place he and Jeff had gone to in Seattle before the opera several months before. Jensen was halfway through the meal when he realized it might be based on that recipe. Jared had said he liked to try and replicate food from restaurants he enjoyed.

After the meal, they'd settled back in the living room for the new episodes of *Mysterious History* and *Battleground: Cupcake*. For Jensen it had been fun being able to indulge in some of his favorite shows without feeling a little guilty because he knew Jeff really didn't really like bad history, paranormal phenomena or baking shows. It was one of his only faults and Jensen put up with his sighs and groans with good humor. However, being able to just watch the shows—with Jared there instead of on the phone—had been a lot of fun. Jensen had gone to bed feeling happy and looking forward to the next day.

Then the dream started.

It was one of the bad ones, one of the ones that made going to sleep a scary thing. He was in a strange landscape, red land filled with the bones of long-dead creatures, the brittle pieces snapping under his feet as he walked. There was a huge cliff in front of him and it was covered with strange bumps. They were ugly, terrifying bumps and as he stared at them, he could feel a bump forming on his stomach. A moment later he felt another. The need to remove the things was becoming overwhelming, so he picked up a pair of scissors from the base of the cliff and went to cut the bumps away from his body. The first one was hard to get the scissors around, but he finally managed, and it popped off. There was a sharp flash of pain that felt real, physical, but he didn't have time for that to register all the way. The second bump on his skin was getting larger, more angry, so he cut that one away as well. Another flash of pain shot across his body. He was zeroing in on another one, trying to get a look at it before he cut it away.

"STOP!" a voice commanded. "Stop!"

Jensen turned towards the voice. Somehow Jared was standing by the cliff, his hand outstretched. "What?" he asked. "Jared?" Why was Jared even in his dream?

"Hey, hand me those okay?" Jared's voice was gentle. Jensen looked from the scissors to Jared's hand and back. He frowned, but handed the scissors over, maybe Jared needed to cut bumps too? "Good, now, let's see what's happened." Jared stepped closer.

"What?" Jensen asked again. The dreamscape was shifting. He was at the cliff, but also in his bathroom. Maybe?

"Here, let me look," Jared said, gently turning him around. The next moment shaking hands pressed something against his stomach. "I'll get a better look in a sec," Jared muttered, pressing a little harder.

The pressure and the trembling hands pulled Jensen all the way out of the dream. He blinked, and he was in the bathroom, the cliff and the bones long gone. "Jared? What?" His eyes caught their reflection in the mirror. Jared had some tissue pressed against Jensen's abdomen. Jared pulled the tissue away and blood started welling up again.

"It's okay," Jared said gently, like he was comforting a terrified animal.

Jensen looked from the Jared's hands to the bloody set of toenail clippers, suddenly sick, knowing what he'd done. "No, no it's not," he said, hearing defeat in his voice. His hands were bloody too. "No, it's not."

"It is." Jared guided him to the toilet and helped him sit down. "Let me look again." He pulled his hands away and Jensen was hit with a wave of nausea. It looked like a slaughter. "Don't worry, this is looks worse than it is, I think," Jared said, glancing around. He straightened and opened the medicine cabinet, grabbing several packages of sterile gauze and the alcohol. "This will probably sting."

"I probably deserve it," Jensen muttered under his breath.

"No, you don't." Jared knelt and opened one of the packages of gauze, put alcohol on it and started cleaning the blood off Jensen's skin. The wounds were still bleeding, and he was having a hard time staying ahead of the steady trickle. "This isn't working. I'm going to tape them down and see if they stop bleeding. If not..." He trailed off.

Jensen looked at him. Jared was completely white, as if every drop of blood in his face had drained into his feet. His hands were shaking so badly he was having a hard time opening a Band-Aid. Jensen tried to find his voice to tell him it was okay, but a sudden wave of guilt paralyzed him. This was Jared's first time out of his house in literally years and now he was dealing with this. Jensen's eyes started to burn. He hated this illness, he hated the Big Book and now this would have to go in there too. What if he was losing his mind? It was the thing that terrified him, what if the illness took his mind? He didn't know if he could face that, the last few months were bad enough, but what if it went on forever? What if he...?

"Hey," Jared said, his voice not betraying any of the fear on his face. "Let's get out of here."

Jensen stood and shuffled into the hall. He stopped and looked at the door to his bedroom. There was almost no chance of getting back to sleep anytime soon. He sighed.

"Come here," Jared said from behind him. He took Jensen's arm and pulled him towards the guest bedroom. "I have the entire first season of *Battleground: Cupcake Special Edition* on my streaming account." He gave Jensen a gentle shove towards the bed.

"Jared?" Jensen turned to him, wondering what was going on.

"I..." Jared stopped and looked away. "I don't know if I'll be able to get out the door again if I hear something. I think it's safer if we just hang and watch something. Is that okay?" He sounded unsure, a little embarrassed and completely freaked. Jensen knew the tone well, it had come up once while they were one the phone. Jared had ever explained more than "someone unexpected at the door" but he had that same tone and looking at him, Jensen could see the other man was right on the edge of a panic attack.

"Yeah." Jensen sank down onto the bed. "I won't be able to get back to sleep for a couple of hours." He blinked. He hadn't meant to say that. The filter between his brain and mouth didn't seem to be functioning. "They're kind of starting to hurt." He reached for his shirt.

"Don't pick at them!" Jared gently smacked his hand and flopped down on the bed. He flipped on the TV and pulled up the menu. "Cupcakes? Or... Hmm. I have some daily life in the ancient world shows, actual almost history. I was using them as research."

"Research?" Jensen couldn't stop the climb of his eyebrow.

"Yes." Jared grinned at him. "It's more 'how things look' when you—for example—tan a hide."

"Tan a hide?"

"In the third *Devil's Detectives* novel, they hunt a serial killer through the portal. He was hiding in 920 A.D. England as a tanner."

"I know I'll regret this, because I know some of the particulars of historic tanning techniques but..."

"Should we watch? I think that one is on a 'You think your job sucks' series. The host goes around and learns the old way to do things. He tans hides, makes a mini Stonehenge and stuff. It starts out in the ancient world with Egypt and goes through the Victorian era." Jared was flicking through the menu as he spoke.

"Sure, I'm game. I'll be up all night, so a bunch of episodes will be handy." Jensen swung his legs onto the bed and Jared pulled the blankets over them.

"Ready? Here we go—episode one, making a mummy."

The sun on his face woke Jensen. He was disoriented for a moment, lying on his right side, the sun shouldn't be on his face. Opening his eyes, he blinked at the window, the light slanting through an opening in the curtains. He was in the guest bedroom at the front of the house. How did that happen? Fear blasted the rest of sleep away. How was he going to explain all this to Jeff? He heard footsteps on the stairs and took a deep breath, not wanting to face this, but he sat up and waited. As he did, something pulled on his stomach, and the night before came back in one paralyzing rush.

"Hey," Jared said from the door.

"Hey," Jensen replied, trying to hide his embarrassment and shame about what had happened.

"Do you want breakfast?"

"Coffee first." He glanced at the clock, he'd managed to sleep until almost nine. That was a surprise after what had happened. He had a vague memory of watching TV and drifting off to the sounds of Jared's soft snores.

"I'll get one going for you, milk and sugar, right?"

"Thanks."

Jared turned to go and stopped, looking back in concern. "Would you like me to bring it up?"

"No, I'd rather come downstairs." Jensen had no intention of spending the day in bed. If the sun decided to hang around until after coffee, he might see if he could convince Jared to go outside and stalk the hummingbird for half an hour.

“Okay!” Jared smiled and turned away. A moment later Jensen heard the second stair creak. It was his personal burglar alarm. Assuming someone managed to get in past the security system, they would hit that creaky stair and wake him. Jeff was the only one who ever missed the noisy spot.

Jensen swung his legs out of bed and stood, waiting as a small wave of dizziness washed through him. Luckily, morning dizziness was nothing new, so he padded into the bathroom. When he was finished, he pulled up his shirt and looked at the Band-Aids on his abdomen. Should he change them? He reached for one, then stopped. It was probably better to leave it alone for the time being. He headed into his room, changed into a favorite t-shirt and pair of sweats and headed down the stairs. Jared was just sitting down at the breakfast nook, a cup of coffee in his hands. Another was already sitting on the table. Jensen slid into the chair and picked his coffee up, staring down into the liquid.

“I like this roast,” Jared said. He smiled a little sheepishly. “This might be my third cup.”

“Might be?” Jensen asked with a laugh.

“Probably is. I usually don’t drink that much coffee all at once, but it tasted good and I was distracted by the huge flocks of birds at your feeders and didn’t notice I’d finished two cups.”

“I’ll catch up, give me half an hour.”

“You’ll need some food.”

“There’s cereal in the cupboard.”

Jared laughed. “You have a cereal obsession.”

“No, I know my limitations very well and so far I’ve only ruined three bowls of cereal,” Jensen said, sipping his coffee.

“Only three? How do you ruin a bowl of cereal? Never mind, I probably don’t want to know.”

“You really don’t.”

“I was thinking about pancakes.”

“I know we don’t have any pancake mix in the…” He trailed off, Jared was looking at him like he had two heads. “You don’t use mix?”

“No, it doesn’t taste right. You have some plain yogurt and I noticed a jar of wheat germ at the back of the fridge. I’ll skip asking why there is a jar of wheat germ at the back of the fridge.”

“I like it with honey,” Jensen blurted out and then stopped, surprised that he’d said anything. Jeff still teased him about that particular snack food.

“With honey?” Jared stood and pulled a bowl out of the cupboard. He must have already discovered the other items he needed, he had everything out on the counter in short order.

“Yeah.” Jensen felt his cheeks get hot. “My grandmother used to give it to me as a dessert. She’d mix honey into wheat germ. I thought it was candy or something until I was about twelve and was visiting a friend’s house for the summer.”

“They didn’t have wheat germ and honey?”

“They didn’t! And when I asked about it, his mom looked at me like I was a freak.”

“Most kids don’t ask for wheat germ.” Jared was measuring flour into the bowl.

“That’s what she said.”

Jared stopped what he was doing and looked at him with his eyebrows up, his lips pressed together in a thin line. It took Jensen half a second to realize what he’d said, then started laughing. After a moment Jared started laughing too. “I can’t believe you said that!” he said, as he stirred the mixture in the bowl, still laughing. “How many do you want to start?”

“One?”

“Three?” Jared offered. “You need more than one pancake for breakfast.”

“I don’t eat that much in the morning.”

“Fine. Two.” Jared smiled at him. “Do you have a griddle, or should I use a skillet?”

“There’s a griddle in the cabinet to the left of the oven.”

“Thanks.” He chuckled. “Of course, that’s the one place I didn’t look. This won’t take long now. If you wanted to make yourself useful, you could get out all the other stuff—butter, syrup, jam, whatever you like.”

“Jared,” Jensen said quietly, wondering what he should say about what happened the night before.

“I prefer syrup.”

“Jared.”

“And butter, of course. And I might need more coffee.”

“Jared.” He got up and walked towards the stove.

“Making coffee?”

“Look, about…”

“Don’t worry about it now. Let’s have breakfast, and I thought since it was nice, you might want to sit outside for a little while? I can keep an eye on you from in here.” He turned and met Jensen’s eyes. “If you want to talk now, we can, if you want to eat and talk about the bastard or whatever that’s fine, too.”

“What?” Jensen’s was used to Jeff’s “talk now or else” policy in the aftermath of what Jeff called incidents.

“Do you need to talk about it sometime? Yes. Does it have to be now? No. Why? Because sometimes you need to let stuff bounce around in your own head before talking. Or, maybe you need to get used to the idea of letting what’s bouncing around out.” Jared turned back to the stove. “It’s up to you though. It has to be, or talking won’t do any good.” He smiled. “One thing The Day It Happened taught me—you have to be ready to talk about things, trying before you’re ready just messes you up worse. Or it did for me.”

Jensen felt some of the tension that had been working itself into a knot in his back releasing. “Thanks.”

“You can thank me by making me a fresh cup of coffee to go with the pancakes I’m slaving over.”

“You still have some in your cup!” Jensen said with a laugh.

“But it’s all cold and stale now. Hot coffee goes better with pancakes.”

“I’m sure it does.” Jensen poured the cold coffee out and popped a fresh pod in the coffeemaker. “Two sugars, right?”

“Yep, perfect. Just in time, too, I think the first batch is ready to eat. *Someone* should set the table and get the syrup before the pancakes get all cold and stale too.”

“Very funny,” Jensen said, setting Jared’s coffee on the table, then grabbing plates out of the cupboard. “If that happens, you’ll just have to make more.”

“Sad but true.” Jared laughed. “Sad but true.”

## Sixteen

The kitchen was warm as Jared checked on the biscuits he had in the oven. After breakfast, Jensen had gone outside to sit in the sun and take pictures. Even though it was cold in the shadows, the sun felt warm when Jared had opened the door to the deck to check on him. That was an hour before and Jared had been keeping an eye on the other man through the window as he emptied the dishwasher and made biscuit dough. He'd been feeling a tiny flutter of—not really panic, more anxiety—but before it could really get a good hold, he'd decided to cook and that cleared away all but the tiniest twinge of the emotion. He was beginning to wonder if that little twinge, like a chronic ache, would ever go away. The odd thing was he was less anxious than he had been in a very long time, and considering what had happened the night before, that was a huge surprise.

Finding Jensen covered in blood had been hard. It had pretty much kicked off every alarm Jared had, but somehow his concern for his friend overrode the panic and he'd been able to function—even in the face of all that blood. They would have to talk about that. He'd meant what he said about letting Jensen have the space to talk when he wanted to, but he had to talk about it. Jared was worried, not just that Jensen had been hurting himself, but that he hadn't seemed awake or aware that he was doing himself harm when Jared had first found him. One day when they were talking, Jensen had said something about “another mystery bruise” but he'd laughed it off. Now that comment, when the night before was added in, was worrying. The fact that Jensen hadn't spoken to Jeff about it was even more worrying.

Jared had no intention of losing his friend. He realized how much he'd changed since that first exchange on The Artists' Cave and the change had all been for the better. When that thought had first crept into his head, he had started self-sabotaging. He was fooling himself. He needed double doors and keyed elevators to be safe. People wanted to hurt him. A large part of him still believed that—the thing he also knew, not just believed but knew, right down to his bones—was that Jensen was not part of “people”. Jeff wasn't either. They wouldn't hurt him, he was safe with them. That was a huge revelation. That sense of safety, even being here away from those double doors.

Of course, that sense of safety had been tempered at first by the heavy wood doors and the deadbolt on his bedroom. Earlier, while he'd been waiting for Jensen to wake up, he'd taken a little tour around the house and had noticed the picturesque but very functional wrought iron fence. There was a heavy iron gate on the walkway from the lower gardens that looked like something designed more for a castle than a quiet corner of the rural plateau. Finally, Jensen hadn't been kidding about the “field of fire” around the house. No one could approach the house without being seen.

He was also becoming fond of the house itself. The kitchen was the beginning of the fascination. It had been remodeled and modernized, but the Butler's Pantry was still tucked in one corner and the cabinets hadn't been refaced in the update. Just to the left of the kitchen was what had been a formal dining room and now looked to function primarily as an office. There was a door at one end of the dining room that led to Jeff's part of the house, and another that led into Jensen's office and darkroom. The living room was comfortable, and the huge picture window had a perfect view of the gardens and the lake. Upstairs were Jensen's room, the bedroom Jared was staying in, the bathroom—complete with a claw-footed tub—and at the back of the house, the library. The room had been purpose-built as a library, built-in dark wood shelves and a ladder on a track so it could be moved along the wall.

“Wow, those smell good!” Jensen said from the door.

“Thanks.” Jared turned towards him. “I made some fruit stuff to go with them. Have you ever had biscuits, cheese and jam?”

“What and jam?”

“Cheese! I know it sounds weird, but I had it at one of the European conventions I attended. I was dubious, but it's awesome. I saw the frozen raspberries and thought it would be good and we could eat in front of the TV if you wanted.” Jared noticed he said it all in one breath, almost as if he were waiting for something *bad* to happen.

“I'm game.” Jensen smiled at him. “Let me put the camera away and we can see what's on.”

“Did you see that! He just cheated! You can't add stuff after the buzzer!” Jensen said three hours later. They were watching *Battleground: Cupcake* from the On Demand menu.

“I think Ron spotted it! Look, he's talking to Melissa.” Jared pointed to the screen where two of the judges were leaning together and talking without their mics on.

“Ha! Busted!” Jensen crowed a moment later when the contestant was disqualified. “What a slime bag!”

“And he tried to blame his helper. I'm pretty sure she wasn't the six-foot three hairy guy who put that on the cupcakes,” Jared added. “I hope that loses him a lot of business.”

“Uh, do you think we might be a little too invested in a show about cupcakes?”

“I think we support the spirit of healthy competition.”

"Is that what you tell yourself?"

"It is," Jared said, laughing. "It works too, because usually you back me up."

"I do, don't I?"

"You really do. Remember last month during the special edition?"

"Hey, I only shouted a little."

"You scared the hell out of Jeff."

Jensen chuckled. "I did. You should have seen his face! I wished I'd been a little faster with the camera."

"He probably would have thrown it into the lake next chance he got."

"He would have, then felt bad he ruined it."

"Until he remembered why it needed to go swimming?" Jared asked.

"Pretty much, although I still owe him one for the last trip to the coast."

"The seagulls?"

"Yes," Jensen grumbled. "The seagulls. He said he didn't know that would happen... Sure, he didn't."

"It made a great video."

"Except for the maniacal laughter of the guy filming it," Jensen said sourly.

"I don't know, I thought that was part of what made it great."

Jensen opened his mouth to reply but stopped when his phone chimed. "Huh."

"What's that?"

"It's the geo alert thing, for severe weather, earthquakes and emergencies."

"Mine didn't go off." Jared picked his phone up from where it was sitting on the couch. He frowned at it, then glanced up. Jensen was shaking. "What's wrong?" When he didn't get an answer, he reached over and turned the phone, so he could read the message, looking down at the phone, his heart gave a little skip.

*Message from JEFF I'm OK.*

"It's that message thing." Jensen sounded terrified. "It's tied in to the National Weather Service and USGS, I think, and it goes off when there is a storm or something. There was an earthquake up by Issaquah one day and I didn't even know, until the stupid alert on my phone went off. There's a message that comes up every time the disaster alert thing goes off in case you're caught in something. It gives the option of sending 'I'm okay' or 'Send help' to your contacts." He was fumbling for the remote. Before Jared could stop him, he had the channel on a news station. "Freak Storms Terrorize West" was running on the ticker at the bottom of the page.

"...Power is out to hundreds of thousands. The storms spawned severe thunderstorms, gale force winds and several tornadoes." A cheerful blond newswoman was smiling at the camera as she continued. "The following video, taken less than an hour ago, may be disturbing to some viewers. Viewer discretion is advised." A moment later, the video started playing. It looked like a traffic camera. The sky was black, Jared had never seen a sky quite that color before. As they watched, a tornado crashed down onto the street, heading straight towards a building with an art deco marquee.

"That's the Ambassador," Jensen whispered. "It's downtown from where Jeff is."

"He's okay, Jensen, he just text..." Jared trailed off as the tornado rammed straight into the building, bricks twisting in the maelstrom, leaving a massive gash in the building before moving on. The video changed and showed an airport, hail the size of golf balls on falling on the tarmac.

"The conference is at an airport hotel. Did he send the message before or after this happened?" Jensen was typing on his phone, his eyes bright. "Shit." His hands were shaking so badly, he dropped the phone. "Hit send, please," Jensen said when Jared tried to hand it back to him.

Jared did as he asked and set the phone down on the coffee table. He reached out and pulled Jensen against him in a half hug. "I'm sure he's okay. The message came through after that had to have happened," he said, gesturing at the TV.

"What if there's a time delay on the message?"

"I'm sure he's okay."

"He's the reason I'm here. After Kurtis, I tried to kill myself. He saved me, stayed in the hospital with me and stuck by me when no one else did." Jensen took a shaky breath. "He told the university he was going to quit while all that was going on. He was willing to leave his career."

"He's okay," Jared repeated, worried about the way Jensen was trembling. Jared grabbed the afghan off the back of the couch and pulled it over them. He was aware of the other man leaning against him. It had been a long, long time since he'd had physical contact with anyone other than his doctor—and that was in no way pleasant. The fact he'd reached for Jensen without thinking about it was something he would need to think about later. He'd always been affectionate with his friends in college and grad school. Once he was focused on his career, he'd let a lot of his friendships fade. Even before The Day It Happened, he tended to spend his time alone. After, he'd been

alone. The few people he'd thought were friends disappeared during the time he was in the hospital. In the years since, only one had even bothered to try and contact him. They exchanged Christmas e-cards, but that was all. Things were different with Jensen and had been since that first exchange on The Artists' Cave. Jared kept coming back to that. It was different, and that difference was letting him change, or grow or whatever it was that was happening.

"May be disturbing to some viewers," the cheerful voice of the newscaster said again.

"Let's turn this off," Jared suggested gently. "They're just going to keep repeating this until they get something more sensational."

"You're right," Jensen agreed, his voice sounding bitter. "Jeff would kill me if he knew I'd been watching the news."

Jared changed it back to *Battleground: Cupcake*, picking up where they had left off. He wasn't sure if he should acknowledge Jensen's silent tears. After a quick glance out of the corner of his eyes, Jared decided to let it go, unless Jensen said something. He focused back on the TV and started a running commentary. Several minutes into his monologue he heard Jensen chuckle. It was a little half-hearted, but it was a chuckle. When the episode ended, he started the next one without asking, listening to the introductions and wondering what he should do for dinner. Jensen might not want to eat, but he needed to have something, and Jared was starting to worry about Jeff and the best way to handle that was to cook. However, he had no intention of leaving Jensen alone in the living room yet. A loud jangling ring interrupted his thoughts.

"That's the house phone," Jensen said, struggling to get up.

"I'll get it." Jared stood and stepped over to the phone. "Hello?"

"You have a collect call from Jeff," a computer's voice said. "Will you accept charges?"

"Yes!" Jared looked over at Jensen. "It's Jeff."

"Hello?" Jeff's gruff voice came over the line, it sounded like there was music in the background. "Jensen?"

"Right here," Jensen said, taking the phone, but turning it so Jared could hear. "Are you okay?"

"Yes. I'm in a storm shelter at the hotel, I'm using their phone."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jensen asked.

"Yes, I am. We made it to the shelter before it got bad, but..."

"But?"

"I won't be home tomorrow. They said the airport got a bit roughed up and flights are being delayed."

"We'll be okay," Jared said firmly. "Make sure you stay safe." He gave Jensen's shoulder a squeeze. "I'm going to go get dinner started."

Jared headed into the kitchen. As he opened the door on the refrigerator, he realized his hands were shaking. He'd been more worried about Jeff—and Jensen—than he thought. He took a slow breath in through his nose and let it trickle out slowly through his mouth as he thought about what to make for dinner. After discovering fresh ginger in the produce drawer, he decided to make stir fry. When he'd made spaghetti the night before, he noticed that all the pasta in the house was a high protein kind, so he felt less guilty about making noodles and vegetables for a second night.

"He really is okay," Jensen said, coming into the kitchen. "The storm shelter is in or next to a basement pub. In fact, the place had a band in rehearsing for tonight because they were hosting an after-hours conference party for the attendees tonight."

"An after-hours party for the conference?" Jared asked dubiously.

"You know, PhDs are wild and crazy."

"That's why I didn't finish mine, I couldn't handle the party lifestyle." Jared set the vegetables by the cutting board. "Can I trust you to get the water boiling again?"

"I'll try, assuming you want to press our luck with the whole 'nothing bad happened last night when he helped' thing."

"I'll risk it." Jared laughed.

"What are we having?"

"I thought chow mein?"

"From scratch?" Jensen shook his head as he filled a pot with water. "Seriously?"

"How else? Do you have any peas?"

"There are some in the freezer."

"I didn't see any."

"They're hiding in the big freezer, I'll get them." He set the pot on the stove and opened the back door. Jared watched as he went into the small entryway and opened what Jared thought was a closet. "I forgot to tell you we have a stealth freezer." He handed Jared a bag of peas. "I have a block of tofu, is it any good if it's been frozen?"

“Why is the tofu frozen and why do you have a stealth freezer?”

“The tofu is frozen because I accidentally turned the fridge up too high and it froze, so Jeff tossed it in the freezer. I suspect he was just waiting to throw it out. Can you use it?”

“Yes,” Jared answered with a smile. “It actually makes the consistency more meat-like, so it’s fine.”

“Really? Phew!” Jensen smiled back. “We have a stealth freezer because we have a membership in a farm starting in early spring and we can’t eat everything, so we put it in the freezer.”

“A membership?” Jared picked up the brick of tofu and eyed the microwave. He’d never defrosted tofu that way, but it might work. He decided that he would cook it separate just in case something went wrong and tossed it in the microwave.

“It’s Community Supported Agriculture. We pay a membership and every week we get a share of the harvest. It helps support the farm and it’s all organic. The early spring stuff is heavy on greens—not my favorite things—but it’s worth it once the berries start coming in.”

“I love berries. In fact, I’ve never met a berry I didn’t like.” Jared laughed. “It still doesn’t explain why it’s a *stealth* freezer.”

“One of Jeff’s clients is a cabinet maker. He was working on an idea to hide big refrigerators in these historic kitchens and asked Jeff if he could build us one to see how it worked.”

“That’s a really good idea. I know when I was looking for someplace, I went into some older places and they were beautiful, but the refrigerators really bugged me for some reason,” Jared said, taking the tofu out of the microwave and cubing it. He started heating the oil in a pan and dropped in some fresh ginger.

“They bothered Bruce too, that’s why he came up with the stealth idea. Since it was a trial run, he and Jeff decided to do the freezer first. Bruce plans on coming back and doing the fridge sometime, but he has so many orders, he’s backed up almost a year at this point.” Jensen sighed and looked at him. “Jared, you don’t have to stay longer than you planned.”

Jared glanced up from what he was doing. “What?”

“You...” Jensen looked at the floor. “Don’t have to stay, just because Jeff is delayed.”

“Why would you think?” He turned towards the other man. Jensen looked almost gray. Jared wondered what he could say, he was good with words, but things like this always threw him. After a moment, he smiled. “Trying to get rid of me?”

“What?”

“You think you can use this to get out of our bet? We still have three more episodes of *Battleground: Cupcake All-Stars!* And you bet on the wrong team!”

“That’s not what I...” Jensen trailed off and a bright smile lit his face. “It was worth a try, I just didn’t want to see you humiliated when Peter takes the tournament.”

“He is so not winning.” Jared went back to chopping the vegetables.

“He so is.”

“Keep that up and I won’t make dessert.”

“Empty threat.” Jensen laughed, then met Jared’s eyes with a serious look. “Thank you.”



## Seventeen

It was a beautiful day. The garden was lit by bright sunlight and puffy white clouds dotted the sky over the foothills and Mount Rainier. Jensen was sitting in his lawn chair, listening to the angry chirping of the hummingbirds. There were two of them fighting over one of the feeders. A few moments before, he'd filmed the two of them wrestling in the dirt in front of the roses, dust flying around them in little clouds. He'd never realized how fierce the tiny birds were until he started feeding them. After watching them for the better part of a year, he was convinced if they were a little bigger they would rule the earth with the ferocity of angry velociraptors.

Jensen had settled in the garden after lunch. He'd spent the morning in his office, answering a few emails and debating the request for an article on daily life in late-Roman Britain. He'd been writing for the journal off and on since grad school. He was still debating it when Jared had appeared at the door and before long, Jensen had his computer open to his gallery and they were talking about his photos. He hesitantly told Jared about his idea for a book on the graveyards of the West, and had been surprised at the enthusiastic response. One thing led to another and they had spent almost an hour planning a potential route for the trip, heading into eastern Washington and Idaho along the Lewis and Clark trail, then through western Montana, and back towards the coast on the Oregon Trail.

When Jared had headed into the kitchen to make lunch, Jensen had followed. He perched on the stool at the island and watched Jared cook. It was funny, but it felt like they had been doing this for years. Jared didn't feel like a guest, he felt like part of the household that had just been missing for a while. The day before, even in the middle of the fear for Jeff, Jensen was aware of the solid presence of Jared, warm and comforting beside him. Jensen had been a little surprised at how easily he accepted the comfort. It hadn't stopped when they had gone into the kitchen to cook dinner. Jared was affectionate without being overbearing. A hand on the shoulder, or a nudge as he got their meal ready. After dinner, while they watched TV, Jared had been there, close but not invasively so and the evening had wound to a comfortable end. Once they had gone upstairs, Jared had asked if he was okay and after thinking about it for several minutes, Jensen had admitted to himself—and the other man—that he wasn't as steady as he liked to think. With that admission came the offer from Jared to sleep with him in the guest room again. Jensen had almost said no—Jared was a guest and... but Jared had explained that he had shared many beds at conventions when he'd first started writing and couldn't afford a single bed, let alone a single room and he was fine with it.

All of that left Jensen a lot to think about as he sat in the garden watching the birds. The Steller's Jay was poking hopefully through the hazelnut tree, there was a brightly colored finch complaining about the jay's presence and a group of juncos had gathered under the birdfeeders, picking up what the sparrows were tossing off. A small falcon that seemed to think the birdfeeders were there to make his hunt for dinner easier was perched on the edge of the roof watching everything. Unfortunately for the raptor, one of the hummingbirds spotted him and started swooping at him, chattering away, trying to drive him off. Jensen slowly lifted his camera, focused on the birds and started snapping pictures. How the hummingbird heard the shutter over the racket it was making, Jensen would never know, but after casting a contemptuous glance in his direction, the little bird took off towards the roses.

"I just got cookies out of the oven, would you like to come in for a cup of coffee?" Jared called from the door.

"Sounds good. The bastard took off." Jensen set his camera on the table and stood.

"Hey." Jared's voice was gentle and panicked at the same time. "Talk to me."

Jensen wondered what was going on. His legs were cold, but the rest of him was cradled against something warm. It took another moment for him to realize he was on the ground, Jared's arms wrapped around him. "What?"

"Jensen?"

"What happened?" It came out more like a croak than words.

"Hey, are you back?"

Jensen cleared his throat and opened his eyes. "What happened?"

"You fell. You just dropped like you'd been hit." Jared took a shaky breath. "Are you okay to get up?"

"I think so." Jensen started to push himself up, but Jared had other ideas and lifted him onto his feet, keeping a steadying hand around his waist. Jared picked up the camera and slung it over his other shoulder. "Thanks."

"Ready?" Jared waited until he nodded, then helped him into the house, steering him through the kitchen to the couch in the living room. "Who do I need to call?"

"Can you just bring me a cup of coffee?" Jensen asked.

"I'm not sure, you blacked out or something."

"It's not the first time, Jared. If you take me into the ER, best case is they admit me, run a million tests for the next couple of days, then release me to bed rest. Worst case is they ignore me, accuse me of being a drug addict and send me home with nothing."

"But..."

"How about you get me a cup of coffee and see if you can get a hold of Jeff? Please?"

Jared stood, looking unsure, for almost a full minute. “Okay, but I get to talk to him and if he says go, you go.”  
“Fair enough.”

Jensen leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes, trying to remember what had happened. There was nothing there, one second he was standing up, then next he was on the ground. His heart was hammering in his chest, which would worry him more, but it often happened when he woke from a nap or after one of these “incidents.” There was something new—an odd electrical sensation under his skin. He’d noticed it once or twice as he was dozing off lately, but never this pronounced. He looked up as Jared came back in the room, carrying two mugs of coffee in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” Jared set the plate on the coffee table and sat down on the edge of the couch, smiling as he pulled out his phone and dialed. “Hi, yeah, I don’t know. Jensen blacked out or something.” Jared paused. “He was in the garden and I saw him fall. I’ll ask. Were you dizzy first?” he asked, looking at Jensen.

“No, I don’t even remember falling. I started to stand, then I wasn’t standing anymore.”

“Did you hear that? No, not really, long enough for me to get out the door and get to him. He was talking shortly after I got there.” Another pause. “Me? Yeah, I’m…” He stopped, the blood drained from his face and his hands started shaking. “I’m still here. I’m okay, I didn’t even think, I just…” Jared stopped again. “Should I take him to the ER? It’s up to you.”

“Are you okay?” Jensen asked, laying his hand on Jared’s arm.

“Right. Let me hand the phone to Jensen.” Jared held the phone up and stood.

“Jeff?” Jensen said, watching Jared head towards the kitchen.

“Was it like the others?”

“Exactly like them,” Jensen assured him.

“Okay, no hospital trip,” Jeff said. “But if something else happens, promise you’ll go without raising an unholy stink, okay?”

“I promise.”

“How’s Jared?”

“Jared?” Jensen repeated, then realized what Jeff was asking and what had happened. “Shit! I didn’t even think about it. What should I do?”

“Don’t let him get caught up in his head. He’s made a couple of huge steps, don’t let him go backwards.”

“I won’t.”

“I don’t think he will, but keep an eye on him.”

“That’s what you said to him about me, too, isn’t it?” Jensen asked,

“Of course, it is. I was planning to call tonight after the stupid speaker gets done with his stupid speech.”

“That bad?”

“It was one of the reasons I was planning on leaving early,” Jeff said with a laugh. “I’ve got to go, I’ll call after the cocktail thing.”

“Talk to you then.”

“Of course, you could always call with an emergency to get me out of there. Wait, I take that back. I don’t want to jinx us all. Rest.”

“Yes, Mom.” Jensen laughed and broke the connection. He wondered if he should get up and check on Jared.

“I’ll be right out,” Jared called. “I’m just stirring the stew.”

Jensen grabbed his cup of coffee and pulled the quilt over his legs as he listened to Jared moving around in the kitchen. He was beginning to suspect that one of Jared’s coping mechanisms was cooking. He seemed to remember at one point during their email conversations Jared mentioning that cooking helped keep him on a schedule some days. Now that he knew who Jared was, and what had happened, the comment made sense. Thinking about that, he was stunned—and touched—by the fact Jared had made it outside and into the yard.

“The food should be ready in about an hour. I just added the second set of potatoes.”

“Second set?” Jensen asked, moving his legs so Jared could sit on the couch.

“I put in some when I first start cooking down the meat, they mostly dissolve in the gravy, and I add a second set so there are actually potatoes in the stew. Ones you can see, I mean. I did it by accident the first time and really liked the way it tasted.”

“You should write a cookbook.”

“I’ve thought about it,” Jared said, picking up his coffee and handing Jensen a cookie. “The problem is, I don’t really measure stuff unless I’m baking. I tried keeping track of it, but I really tinker when I’m cooking, always adjusting things as I make the food and that’s hard to put into a book in a way that makes sense.”

“Cooking is such a disaster for me, I never think about things like that—I mean trying to make food without measuring. Even then things usually end in something inedible.” Jensen took a breath. “Jared…”

“Jensen...” Jared said at the same moment, he smiled and turned to face Jensen. “You first.”

“Thank you for coming out and getting me,” he said all in one breath. It sounded a little lame when it came out like that. “I mean, uh...”

“You’re welcome. I couldn’t let you lie there and have the bastard take out your eyes or something.”

“Hummingbirds have been known to attack. Seriously, though, Jared.”

“Seriously, I didn’t even think about it. I saw you fall and what else was I supposed to do? Maybe if I had thought about it, things might have been,” he paused and frowned. “No, I don’t think things would’ve been different. I’ve been changing these last months, more than I have in years. Before I offered to come up here, I’d made it to the coffee stand with Charlie and I even ordered pizza by myself and had the doorman bring it up. I know calling a pizza place doesn’t seem like a big deal, but it took almost half an hour to dial the phone.” Jared laughed softly. “Running outside was the same thing that had me calling Jeff that night and offering to stay here. Something’s changed in me.”

“It has?” Jensen prompted gently.

“It has. It started with our first notes, you were the first person I’d talked to in four years other than Charlie and my therapist. That first day I called you in the hospital was a really bad day for me, it was right after the NeedleCon incident, but I still managed to call.” He met Jensen’s eyes and smiled. “I was wrong.”

“Wrong?”

“I was beginning to think I’d never escape what happened. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think I am magically cured, or that I can get in a car and drive, well, anywhere, but I think I’ll be able to someday. Thank you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Jensen protested.

“You’re my friend.” Jared cleared his throat and took a sip of coffee. “We talk about everything except the personal stuff. That helped too. I never felt like you were trying to, um...” He looked embarrassed. “To find me or hurt me. I know you’d never do that, it’s just...”

“I understand. I had that, thanks to Kurtis. I didn’t want to *spea*k to anyone but Jeff. Having things in writing was different. I, um...” It was his turn to look embarrassed. “I had proof in writing of what I’d said. And it helped me, too, the anonymity. I didn’t even know your real name until two days ago. It made it easier, though, to talk. There were no real expectations, we could just talk, you know?”

“Exactly!” Jared said with a bright smile.

Jensen was quiet for a moment, digesting what Jared had told him. Before he really thought about it, he blurted out, “It’s autoimmune.”

“What is?”

“What’s wrong with me, or part of what’s wrong, or whatever. It’s autoimmune. I always heard about rheumatoid arthritis and how it was autoimmune, but I never thought about it beyond that. Turns out, your body can decide to attack itself almost anywhere, not just the joints. When I tried to kill myself, I ended up in the hospital, and they ran a few basic tests. Then, when they thought they’d found something, they ran more. Long story short, they decided it was autoimmune. Every time something new comes up, they make that damn *hmmmm* the medical profession excels at and I get more bad news. It’s why I didn’t want to go in today. I’ve blacked out before, in fact, it was one of my blackouts that led to me being in the hospital that first time you called.”

“What can they do?”

“Nothing,” Jensen said, a little surprised at how bitter he sounded. “That’s not quite true, they can put me on more and more drugs, most with terrifying side effects, but I get the feeling they don’t really understand what’s going on. Sometimes I’m not even sure they believe it’s autoimmune—or anything organic. I’ve had four doctors tell me it was all in my head and prescribe antidepressants. Thankfully, Jeff handles those people for me. Once or twice, it hit me really hard. Then there was the asshole who said my only problem was drug abuse. I’m pretty sure they heard Jeff dealing with him in Australia.”

“Oh, is that what that sound was?”

“Yep.” Jensen smiled, then sighed. “All I know is I hate the Big Book.”

“The Big Book?”

“It’s a notebook where Jeff’s been keeping everything. Luckily, I have a good doc now, or he seems to be. I’ve lost a lot of trust in the medical profession over the last four years.”

“Understandably. One of my cousins has lupus, so I know how hard it can be. My experience with medicine was different, but I had something very big and very visibly wrong with me. They stitched me up and sent me home and since I’m dealing with the result of a physical injury, it’s not really a problem. I guess I was lucky.”

“I wouldn’t say lucky,” Jensen said. “I do occasionally wish there was something really obvious wrong, rather than this slow decline with chronic pain and odd symptoms. I take that back, the one time I ended up in the ER in

the last four years when it *was* something obvious—I'd fallen and managed to sprain my arm and shoulder—I got one of the 'there is nothing wrong but drugs' guys. I thought Jeff was doing to deck him."

"I would too, how can they ignore a sprain?"

"You'd be surprised what they can ignore. Hell, they've ignored me and spoken only to Jeff several times, like I'm not competent to..." Jensen trailed off when he noticed his hands were shaking with a combination of anger and shame. That was one thing the last four years had done—made him ashamed of being ill. "Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for." Jared reached out and gave his hand a squeeze.

"Want to watch something until the stew is done?"

Jared met his eyes for a long moment, then smiled. "Sure. Bad history or good cakes?"

## Eighteen

The rain had settled in with a vengeance. It had started shortly after Jeff had arrived home. The temperature had risen considerably, ushering what they tended to refer to in the Northwest as “the Pineapple Express”—warm, tropical air that brought wind and heavy rains. It was just over seventy degrees, but no one in their right mind would want to be outside. It wasn’t just raining, it was like an angry waterfall was hanging over the plateau. Jared had been glad to get into the house. After he changed, he headed to the kitchen to start dinner.

He needed to cook. It had been a long two days.

The day before, Jared had been in the kitchen, cleaning up after lunch, and he heard Jeff shout to call 911. Jensen had collapsed again. By the time the ambulance arrived, Jensen was conscious and complaining, but he hadn’t been given a choice and they’d transported him. He’d ended up being admitted to the hospital, and Jared had opted to stay so he could spend as much time as possible at the hospital with Jensen. Jeff said it helped, having him there, Jensen was in a better mood and far more cooperative with the staff. And, as long as he was with them, Jared was okay with being away from the house. At first, it had been a little rough, but he’d put his chair in the corner of the room, close to the bed with the wall at his back, and he was okay.

He was okay. Shaky, yes. A little spooked, yes. But okay.

Still, as the second day wore on in the hospital, Jared had noticed he was starting to get jumpy. The scent of the place was enough to bring up the specter of the past. That set him on edge. The constant bickering between Jensen and Jeff didn’t help. Then there had been the blow-up that happened when a nurse had scolded Jensen about not eating his lunch. Jared—the only one with him at the time—had reacted like a mother bear protecting her cub. Jeff had arrived towards the end of Jared’s tirade and things had been what Jensen would later describe as “loud” for a while. Eventually, Jeff had cornered several staff members, the charge nurse and two doctors and read them the riot act. The upshot of it all was Jensen would be released the next day, after morning rounds. Jeff was still fuming when he’d finally given in to Jensen’s request that he take Jared home.

A part of Jared didn’t really want to leave, but he knew he had to get out of the hospital for at least an hour or two. He needed to cook. He needed to calm the increasing anxiety. He needed a little space to think. Jeff had been torn about leaving, Jared could see him weighing things, but he’d acquiesced, and they headed home at seven.

“Do you mind if I sit in here?” Jeff asked from the door to the living room.

“No, of course not,” Jared replied as he carried a handful of vegetables from the fridge to the cutting board. “This won’t take too long to get finished.”

“I could still order something,”

“I need to cook.” The words were out of his mouth before he really thought about them.

“Coping mechanism?” Jeff got a soda out of the fridge and sat at the island.

“One of them,” Jared laughed.

“One of them?”

“I also blog to get things out of my head. Nothing really earthshattering. I just get stuck on things sometimes and getting them on paper, as it were, helps.”

“Makes sense,” Jeff said with a nod. “I’ve encouraged more than one person I was working with to use a journal.” He smiled a little ruefully. “It’s even advice I take to heart myself.”

“I tend to put a lot of my angst into my books rather than the blog.” Jared finished chopping the vegetables right as the water came to a boil. He added the pasta and tossed the rest into a skillet with some olive oil. After spending a day in the hospital, there was no way he could tolerate smelling blood, so he was making another version of veggies, tofu and high-protein noodles. He’d found curry powder and peanut butter and thought he’d try replicating a favorite recipe. He’d tasted it enough to try it without his cookbook.

“I guessed as much. The ones after the attack are more, hmm, unrelenting?”

“I’m glad that comes across.”

“Oh, it does. I’ve been a fan for years. I bought *The Devil’s Detectives* when it first came out. I was attending a conference in Portland and ended up at Powell’s Books. I bought a few books, then spotted yours. I almost didn’t pick it up, the cover didn’t really excite me...”

“I hated that first cover,” Jared said. “I’m glad they redid it when the second book came out.”

“I agree. The clerk ringing me up said I should try it, based on the other books I had. I knew it was going to be a long weekend—I don’t sleep well in hotels—so I figured there was nothing to lose. I picked it up that night and *devoured* it. By page three I was reading faster than usual, but the end of chapter one I was completely hooked. I read the whole thing that night.”

“Can I ask you something?” Jared stirred the food, then glanced over at Jeff.

“Of course,” Jeff replied genially.

“What is it that attracts you to the books?”

“As just a fan? Or professionally?”

“A little of both?”

“Hmm.” Jeff crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “As ‘just’ a fan, it’s easy. They’re well-written, move at break-neck speed and scare the shit out of me every time. I love your characters and have peeked at more than one ending to make sure everyone makes it.”

“That’s cheating!” Jared laughed.

“I won’t deny it. The characters are also what attracts me on a deeper level. They are extremely complex, and you don’t shy away from poking at the dark parts of the soul. That’s one of the things I like most about Seth from the *Fallen* series. While he works with the good guys, he is not necessarily good. The fact that Gerry knows what Seth has done and is willing to do gives a real depth to their relationship. After the attack on you, they gained even more. What Seth does in book four when they take Gerry. Wow. I went back and read that one again immediately after finishing it. His motivations really struck me.”

“Realistically?” Jared asked as he put together the peanut butter curry sauce.

“That’s just it! Your characters motivations are extremely real, even when—or maybe especially when—they are completely and unrelentingly evil.” He chuckled. “I’ve written up profiles, in hopes of figuring out where they might go. Once or twice, I guessed right, but you’ve really got me other times.” He held up his hands. “Which is good! Believe me.”

“Thanks. After *The Day It Happened*, I’ve been able to put a lot of my emotion into it. Honestly, I don’t think I really understood terror until the attack.”

“No, don’t sell yourself short. You might understand it better, or maybe more personally, but you understand it. You understand how to use it and how to create it. One of the things that really hooked me was the sense that there is always, *always*, something terrible lurking in the world. While I was reading book two of *The Devil’s Detectives*, I might have double checked the locks on the doors more than once.”

“Locks really wouldn’t help stop that bad guy.” Jared tossed the noodles and vegetables in the sauce and then carried the skillet to the table and set it on the trivet.

“I know, and that’s when the terror starts to sink in. That looks good.”

“I hope it tastes right. I was going off memory for the recipe.” He put plates and silverware on the table, then sat down opposite Jeff.

“If it tastes half as good as it smells,” Jeff said with a smile. “I’ll be having seconds and possibly thirds.”

“I spend a lot of time thinking about food, I guess. It helps on bad days to plan and make food.”

“Good self-care too.” Jeff nodded as he served himself. He took a bite. “This is fabulous.”

“Thanks.” Jared served himself and they were quiet for a few moments. While Jeff ate, Jared let a thought that had started growing earlier in the day come out into the light. Jensen was ill, Jared didn’t want to leave until he was out of the hospital, but it was more than that. The thought of returning to his lonely eyrie was beginning to feel like a step backwards. “Do you think Jensen would be better if I stayed longer? I mean after he gets out of the hospital?”

Jeff set his fork down and met Jared’s eyes. “Yes, he would. I can see the difference, even though he ill right now. How do you feel about staying?”

“Better than I thought I would a few days ago,” Jared answered honestly. He had very quickly learned that Jeff had a secret superpower of sensing when people were prevaricating about their emotional state. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t think I am magically cured or anything.”

“Hmmm,” Jeff said thoughtfully.

“What?”

“Do you know how often you repeat that particular phrase?”

“What phrase?”

“The one about being magically cured.” Jeff frowned at him.

“I do?” Jared asked, mulling it over. How many times during the day did he think those words? As he let it percolate through his mind, he realized it was one of his mantras. “Huh,” he said as something struck him.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking it—and saying it—more recently.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“I hadn’t even thought about it until just now. The first time I went to the coffee stand in my building with Charlie, I remember saying it to him in the elevator.”

“Yeah?” Jeff started eating again.

“I wonder why?” Jared let the question bounced around in his head as he started eating. The sauce had come out better than he expected.

“Something to think about.”

“Yeah.” At the rate he was piling up things to think about, he wasn’t going to get any sleep at all tonight.

“So,” Jeff said, drawing the O out.

“Yeah?” Jared braced himself for what might be coming.

“Want to give me spoilers for the next book?”

Jared sighed in relief. “I’ll do one better, I’m in the editing phase. You can read a copy before I send it off.”

“Holy shit, really?” The grin on Jeff’s face was enough to make Jared chuckle. It reminded him of the look of a kid at Christmas.

“Really. It’ll be nice to have someone other than Charlie read it before it goes out.”

“Charlie reads for you?”

“In a way. He’ll read it all in one day, and then let me know if anything seems off to him.”

“I’ll read it all in one day,” Jeff assured him. “Maybe an afternoon if I can keep the kids away during office hours. Hot damn, that’s awesome.”

It was quiet as Jared headed upstairs. He’d just gotten off the phone with Jensen. He’d called during dessert to let him know that Jeff would be by at ten to pick him up and after listening to complaints about the coffee, food and TV viewing, he’d managed to distract Jensen for half an hour with an argument about the evolution of Bigfoot. His friend seemed in a much better mood when they hung up, Jared promising that he would have a hot cup of coffee waiting for him when he arrived.

He changed into sweats and dropped on the bed, thinking about his conversation with Jeff. There was a lot to consider. His offer to stay surprised him, the words had been out of his mouth even as he thought about it. Suddenly returning to Seattle had seemed like a bad idea. He picked up his phone and dialed Charlie.

“Hey!” Charlie answered on the first ring. “How’s it going?”

“I’m okay,” Jared answered automatically. “I need to stay longer, though. My friend has been in the hospital and...”

“I understand. Can I bring you anything?”

“I need my computer, the printout of the book and a few more clothes. Is that okay? I’m outside of Enumclaw, up highway 169.”

“Sure, you know me, any excuse to explore someplace new!”

“Thanks.”

“Any time. It’s great to hear you sounding good, Jared. I’m looking forward to seeing you. I’ll be up in the afternoon, depending on traffic out of the city.”

“Talk to you then.”

“See you tomorrow.” Charlie broke the connection.

Jared tossed his phone on the bedside table. Over the last four years, he’d come to rely on Charlie more and more, but until this moment, he never realized that they were friends. He’d felt so alone, so trapped in his own head, it had never occurred to him that they’d become friends. How had he missed that? Charlie had driven him to the doctor’s office. He was the one Jared trusted to take him to get coffee. He’d been there as he took those first shaky steps out of the apartment, and had checked the elevator twice, to make sure they would travel on it alone. When Jared had still been too afraid to open the door for him, Charlie sat in the entry one day, talking to him on the phone, letting him get used to the idea of someone *there* on the other side of the door. It had been a month after that he’d asked Charlie to look through his manuscript. The other man had agreed with alacrity. Maybe his idea that Charlie wasn’t safe had been wrong. No, it wasn’t that, he corrected himself. Obviously, he was safe, but Jared’s idea of it had been wrong.

That led him to Jeff’s question. Why did he repeatedly say, “I don’t think I am magically cured.” In fact, the first person he’d ever said those words to were Charlie, the first day Charlie came into the apartment. No, that wasn’t right, he’d said in in therapy. Funny, he’d been more open with Jeff than his own therapist, and they’d just been chatting. Of course, the sense of safety from Jensen washed over onto Jeff.

Jensen. He’d known he considered Merlin a friend long before they spoke for the first time. That feeling had grown and changed over the hours they spent on the phone. Jared had always believed in the quick flash of love and its even quicker death. He’d never expected the slow bloom from looking forward to an email to finding it hard to imagine a day without someone else. When he heard himself offer to stay earlier, he realized how much that feeling had grown. It had stopped him for a moment, but he knew now he was deeply in love with Jensen. The strange thing about it was that, unlike infatuations in the past, it didn’t matter if Jensen returned the feeling. He loved him no matter what—and that was a huge revelation.

He had more to think about than he thought.





## Nineteen

The downpour of the day before had given way to a steady rain. Even with the rain, or maybe because of it, the garden was full of birds. A pair of mourning doves had staked out territory under one of the birdfeeders, annoying the red-winged blackbird who thought he was in charge of the garden. The hummingbirds disagreed, of course, and there was a small battle going on between the blackbird and three of the tiny green hummingbirds. The chatter was surprisingly loud, even in the living room.

Jensen leaned back into the comfort of the couch. Jared was in the kitchen, the rich smell of cinnamon wafting into the room, and Jeff was in his office, catching up on any emails or calls that had come in. He'd chosen to stay home for the day, postponing a test. When Jensen had protested, Jeff fixed him with the stare-that-kills and said he was staying home. Period. End of discussion. If he was honest with himself, Jensen had to admit he was glad they were there. He was feeling a little shaky after his days in the hospital, and despite the care he'd received, he still felt unwell. If asked, he couldn't really explain it, but there was something more bubbling up in his body, something that felt wrong. It was a different feeling than the day-to-day drag, but when he'd tried to tell the medical staff that, he'd been summarily dismissed.

One thing he was beginning to come to terms with was the toll the repeated dismissals were taking on him. He'd talked about it with Jared, the night before Jeff got home. The conversation from earlier in the day had carried over, and Jensen found himself talking about things he really hadn't faced about his illness and that overwhelming sense of shame that seemed to grow with each trip to the hospital or a doctor other than his own. He was ashamed of the pain. Ashamed he needed something to help with the pain. Ashamed that he wasn't strong enough to "just handle it" as one doctor had told him. And the medical profession was helping push that shame. He'd never really thought about it, until Jared pointed it out. At one point, Jared had even reacted to a story with "he was trying to shame you into admitting something that wasn't true." That comment had given Jensen a lot of food for thought and when he ended up in the hospital, he was more aware of the attitude of staff and comments from doctors. When he heard Jared's explosive reaction to the nurse scolding him, he listened to what was said, then when Jeff continued the "conversation" with staff, he'd listened to that as well. The two people who mattered most to him recognized something he hadn't even been able to put into words. It helped. It didn't end the crippling shame, but recognizing it, giving it a name, was letting him look at it in a different light.

"Nothing major to deal with, just one student complaining he'd studied for the test *today* and will forget everything by Monday," Jeff said, walking into the living room. He dropped into his chair at the end of the couch. "What smells good?"

"Applesauce oatmeal muffins," Jared replied from the kitchen door. "They should be done in about twenty minutes."

"I haven't had time to go shopping. How did you find enough ingredients?"

"Don't ask," Jensen said. "Jared is the MacGyver of the Kitchen. He can make a meal out of anything."

"Anything?" Jeff raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously anything. Remember the tofu you tossed in the freezer? The second night he was here, he turned it into the most amazing stir fry"

"I wouldn't believe you, but he makes a pretty mean peanut butter curry out of nothing," Jeff agreed amiably.

"See?"

"Um." Jared was still in the door, looking unsure.

"Are you okay?" Jensen asked.

"Charlie just texted, he'll be here in ten minutes."

"That's great!" Jeff beamed at Jared.

Jensen suddenly had the impression he'd missed a large part of some conversation. "Why is Charlie coming here?"

"He's bringing a few more things for Jared," Jeff replied easily.

"What?" Jensen turned to look at him.

"Jared's going to stay a little longer."

"He is?" Jensen knew he should be mad. They'd obviously discussed this without even bringing it up to him. He couldn't hold onto anger, however, when something that felt a lot like happiness was warming his chest. It had been a long time, but that's what it felt like. "You are?" He glanced towards Jared.

"Yeah, I thought..."

"Awesome," Jensen answered before Jared could get any further. He was rewarded with a blinding smile that lit up Jared's face. He couldn't help smiling back, and he was aware of Jeff looking thoughtfully at them both. He filed that away for later.

The tableau was broken by the doorbell. Jeff hopped up and headed to the door. Jensen heard his “hello” then the murmur of voices, slowly getting quieter, like the conversation was being taken away where he couldn’t hear it. The front door closed with a *thump*. A moment later, Jeff came back into the living room, carrying a suitcase, followed by another man with a backpack and what looked like an artist’s portfolio case.

“Hey!” the man said with a smile that dimpled the cheeks at the edge of his mustache.

“Hey, Charlie,” Jared replied with a smile. “How was the drive?”

“Really great, once I got off 405. The S-Curves were in high suck mode. There was a fender bender in the HOV and everyone had to check it out. Probably hoping for bodies, the ghouls.”

“Every time I end up on 405 something like that happens. Last time it took me almost thirty minutes to get from the airport to the exit to Auburn. I’m glad my daily commute goes south not north,” Jeff agreed with a nod.

“Lucky fish.” Charlie laughed. “I got the goods, clothes, computer, book and I know you didn’t ask for it, but I brought your pencils and a few of the pads off the desk.”

“Thanks, I didn’t even think of that,” Jared said with a smile. The timer chimed in the kitchen. “I’ll be right back.”

“Why don’t you set that stuff down and sit?” Jeff waved towards a chair.

“Thanks.” Charlie plopped down. “This is a nice place. I saw a bunch of deer as I came up the drive.”

“The former owner had a large winter garden, mostly cold weather greens, and the plants come back every year. The deer think we planted it for them,” Jeff replied.

“My folks had a small apple orchard, and the deer were pretty sure the apples were for them. I remember one day I went out to check on things and there was a big buck crashed under one of the trees, sampling the fruit.”

“Jeff can you give me a hand for a sec?” Jared called from the kitchen.

“Coming!”

The living room fell into an awkward silence as Jeff left. Jensen wasn’t sure what to say. Charlie seemed nervous to be alone with him. He was looking everywhere but at Jensen. After a long moment he cleared his throat.

“Um, I was wondering,” he began, his face turning red.

“What?” Jensen caught himself before he snapped out the question.

“I read all Jared’s books before they ship out, you know, and um, after reading DD three, I became a huge Tony fan. Since then, I’ve read *your* books and, uh, can I get a signed copy of *Bring Out Your Plague*?” The last came out in a rush.

“Why would you want a copy of his book?” Jeff asked as he brought in a plate full of muffins.

“Well, you know, since he’s Tony.”

“He’s Tony, is he?” Jeff turned to Jensen with a grin. “Really.”

“Shut up, Jeff,” Jensen growled.

“That’s a hundred bucks you owe me.” His grin somehow got wider. “I knew it! HA!”

“What’s going on?” Jared walked in carrying four mugs of coffee. He handed one to Charlie, put the other three on the table, then sat on his end of the couch.

“Someone just found out who Tony was based on,” Jeff said smugly.

“And someone is being insufferable about it already,” Jensen added sourly. “I told you this would happen.”

“Sorry.” Jared chuckled and dropped a hand on Jensen’s ankle. “I probably should have mentioned Charlie is a fan.”

“Fan is an understatement. I loved the history in Jared’s book, I never thought reading the real stuff would be so amazing. I scarfed up your books and then went looking for articles. I even have a subscription to *Dark Ages Now*, just for your column!”

Jensen couldn’t help smiling. There was something about Charlie’s enthusiasm that was infectious. “I’ll make sure you have some books when you leave.”

“Thanks!”

By the time Charlie left a couple of hours later, Jensen had formed a liking for him. He was talkative and had quizzed Jensen about his books, one of his recent articles in *Dark Ages Now*, and with a sly smile, offered to read through his next book before it was sent off to his publishers. Jensen couldn’t help laughing and accepting the offer. There had been a time when he had happily shared articles and books with his students. He never realized he missed it until he took Charlie up on his offer.

More than anything, though, Charlie seemed to genuinely care for Jared and was aware of his comfort level with people. Jensen had noticed Jared looking a little uncomfortable, and less than a minute later, Charlie had said he needed to get on the road. Jared walked him to the door, waving while Jeff went out and spoke with Charlie for several minutes before they heard the double beep of a car horn as Charlie drove off the property.

Now, Jared was back in the kitchen, putting dinner together. A few minutes before, Jensen had heard the sound of something hitting hot oil in a pan. The splattering sound was reminiscent of rain on pavement. It was something he'd associated with isolation—rain on an empty patio. When he thought about it, however, that sound was now associated with Jared—long talks on the phone on rainy afternoons, then the food cooking while they talked in the kitchen. A lot of those things he once associated with his isolation were now tied to Jared. Television shows watched late at night—even before Jared was here, they had talked until midnight several times while watching a *Mysterious History* marathon. In fact, one night during the *Fifteen Hours with Cryptozoology's Files Hosted by Rick* they had ended up talking until almost four in the morning. Even being in the hospital had been easier.

Jensen shivered and pulled the blanket up. He couldn't seem to get warm and it was getting worse. Maybe it was time to ask Jeff to make a fire. It always seemed like things were warmer with a fire crackling in the big fireplace on the far side of the room. Even if the room didn't change temperature by very much, it still seemed warmer.

"How're you doing?" Jeff asked, walking into the room.

"I'm freezing."

"You need fire! Me make!" Jeff laughed as he headed towards the fireplace. Jensen laughed along with him, it was a line from a B movie they'd watched one day on the classic movie channel. Jeff was still chuckling as the fire blazed into life. "I'm going to get you a hot cup of coffee." He headed into the kitchen. "Just getting Jensen something warm to drink."

"The soup will be ready in a few minutes," Jared's reply was loud enough to carry into the living room. "Should we eat in there?"

"Sounds good." Jeff reappeared with a mug in his hands, gave it to Jensen, then laid his palm against his forehead. "You don't feel like you have a fever."

"No, I don't," Jensen agreed. "I just can't get warm. Add it to the damn book after dinner."

"I was about to say let's keep an eye on it, not let's put it in the book," Jeff chided gently.

"Sorry. I guess I'm still jumpy."

"Want to tell me what's bouncing around in your skull?" He dropped into his chair and leaned forward, hands clasped. It was his "listening" pose.

"I..." Jensen began. Was he ready to talk about this? Was he even sure what this was?

"I have noticed things, Jensen, and you even admitted that you weren't sure how you broke your toe or hurt your hand. I also noticed Jared's reaction to the nurse scolding you about 'starving yourself' and 'hurting yourself'. I understand how he feels about that, but there was more there than just that incident, wasn't there?"

"It started a long time ago, at first it was just little things. I thought I was blacking out, or having a weird reaction to meds," he offered, hearing the uncertainty in his own voice.

"Mm hmm." Jeff nodded for him to continue.

"Then, one night, I was having a nightmare. I still remember it, I was a prisoner. It was this dungeon-like place with wooden doors and stone walls. It was cold, there was water dripping and it stank."

"The dream had an olfactory component?"

"Yes, it was enough to make me feel nauseous." He closed his eyes and he let the dream play back. "There were other people there, but they were anonymous. They had faces, but they all seemed similar. Vacant eyes, gray skin, bald. I could hear voices. I'm not sure what they were saying, but it was terrifying. I suddenly realized that I had hair, and it made me different, and the voices wouldn't tolerate that, they would hurt me. I was obsessed with getting rid of my hair, shaving it off. I was desperately looking for something to shave with and I found this—I think it was a bit of broken glass or a sharp stone and I was getting ready to shave my head. I can't even start to explain how desperate this obsession was—and there was a *thump* and I woke up," he paused, the terror of that first night coming back. "I was in the bathroom, my razor in my hand."

"To shave your head?"

"Yes, nothing more than that, just my hair." He opened his eyes and looked at Jeff's worried face, then realized Jared was standing by the couch, his expression mirroring Jeff's, Jensen moved his legs and Jared sat down, pulling Jensen's legs onto his lap.

"And that was the first time?"

"As far as I know."

"When was that, exactly?"

"A few days after we visited that specialist, the one who..." He stopped, swallowing the shame that visit had created.

"What else?"

"I'm not sure about some of them. I mean I dreamed something hurt me, or *I* hurt me, and I'd wake up with a wound of some kind."

"That gash on your leg?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure what happened," he said. It was true, he didn't know where the gash had come from. "I have the vague memory of a dream, but I'm not sure. I woke up once with blood on the sheets too. It's like living in a nightmare. I don't remember them all, except," he glanced at Jared with a guilty twist. "The first night Jared was here, I was dreaming about this place, it's been in other dreams. It's a desert with red cliffs. There are sand dunes, but they are actually made from the bones of animals. They crunch under my feet. I was there, in that spot and I saw the cliffs were covered with these terrible growths and I..." He stopped.

"I found him in the bathroom," Jared said, after a quick look to get permission. "He had toenail clippers in his hand and he was cutting a mole off his chest. I got there right as he took the second one off. There was a lot of blood." His voice was shaking.

Jeff raised his eyebrows. "There was blood? And you went in?"

"Yes," Jared answered with an odd look on his face.

"Good!" Jeff smiled at him. "That's good." He turned his look on Jensen. "That was not too long after... Hmmm."

"Do you think there is something wrong with my brain? Do you think it's my illness affecting my mind?" Jensen blurted out the question that had been haunting him for months.

"No, I don't think so," Jeff said after a long moment. "I think it *is* something to do with your illness, but I don't think it's your brain. Let me think about it for a day or two, and if anything else happens, even the *hint* of something, I want to know about it, okay?"

"Okay," Jensen agreed, relief flooding his body.

"Absolutely," Jared said with a firm nod. The timer chimed in the kitchen. He patted Jensen's chest and smiled. "Anyone want fresh bread and potato soup?"

"Sounds awesome." Jensen smiled back.

"Want to give me a hand bringing it in, Jeff?"

"For fresh bread, I'll carry everything myself." Jeff followed Jared into the kitchen.

Jensen watched them go, feeling lighter than he had in months.

## Twenty

There was sun in the garden, the light the soft yellow of winter, but it was sun and the yard was full of birds, preening in the relative warmth. There seemed to be an uneasy truce between the hummingbirds and the rest, primarily because of the new feeders they'd put up two days before. Jared had helped hang the them, five for the hummingbirds and three for the others. Things had been a little scary as he moved things around, one of the tiny green birds had decided he was stealing his food source and had attacked. It was enough to scale up his anxiety and he had glanced nervously towards the house—and spotted Jensen filming them through the big window, laughing in that way that crinkled the edge of his eyes and lit his whole face. It was enough to keep Jared there, despite the terrifyingly ferocious hummingbird.

He'd never known hummingbirds before. He'd mostly lived in cities, so his chance of encounters with anything other than pigeons and mice had been extremely limited. His grandmother had several suncatchers in the shape of hummingbirds, and he remembered she had a feeder in her back garden, but he'd never really seen them. Now that he was getting to know them, he realized the few assumptions he'd had about them were very wrong. Sure, they were tiny, but that was probably a really good thing. Since they were more than willing to take on things much, much larger than they were, it would probably be disastrous for the world if they were bigger. There was a poem he remembered from grad school about hummingbirds, and that was giving him an idea for a new book. There was a line in the poem: *Probably he was a jabbing, terrifying monster/We look at him through the wrong end of the telescope of time/Luckily for us.* It was that line that was now stuck in his head. The trick would be to make it terrifying not cheesy and it would be a fine line.

Jared was letting that bounce around as he loaded the dishwasher. It was surprising how quickly this had become home, but now the other life, trapped in his lonely tower seemed far away. He didn't like to think about returning there, not that he was planning to leave anytime soon.

Jensen was getting worse. So much so, Jeff had stayed home from work for the last two days. He was obviously as worried as Jared. Jeff had assured him this was not part of Jensen's "normal" even on bad days. He did have bad days, even strings of them, where he stayed in bed or on the couch, but typically he improved. There was definitely a decline in his health and they'd called the doctor twice now, but Jensen had no fever, so they weren't sure what was going on. The doctor's advice was bed rest and to keep an eye on it. It was worrying though, Jensen had insisted on laying on the couch this morning, but he had needed both of them to help him down the stairs.

When his phone rang, it took a moment for him to realize what it was. He picked it up. "Hey, Charlie."

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

"Not bad, what's up?"

"I thought I'd see if you needed anything."

"I'm good right now." He paused, there was something off in the other man's voice. "What's wrong?"

"There's a lot of noise in front of the hotel, that's all. Construction mostly. I'm not getting much sleep."

"Hotel?"

"Oh, yeah, they found a meth lab in my building. We were all 'evacuated' for our safety. The building's being condemned."

"That sucks. Why didn't you say anything?"

"You know," Charlie replied. Jared could almost hear the shrug in his voice.

"Look, I'm not going to be back for a while, Jensen is still sick. I have that huge guest suite at the condo. Why don't you stay there for the time being? It's pretty quiet unless there's a storm."

"Seriously?"

"Why not? I'm not using it, and the crow needs company."

"Thank you so much, Jared. I..." He cleared his throat. "Thank you. If you need anything just call, okay?"

"I will, talk soon."

"Yep. Later, man."

Jared broke the connection and thought about what he'd just done. Hearing himself offering his place to Charlie had been a surprise. Knowing someone was staying in the apartment was actually comforting. Helping his friend felt good. He did wonder if there was more to it than that. Was he unconsciously hedging his bets?

He finished loading the dishwasher and walked into the living room. There was a fire roaring in the fireplace. Jensen felt warmer when there was a fire, and now that they'd kept it going all day and most of the night for three days, the hearth stones had warmed up and they were radiating a fair amount of heat. Jensen looked over and smiled. Jared couldn't help but notice how gray he looked, and he looked so small, huddled under several afghans.

"Heard the phone," Jeff said. "Everything okay?"

"It was Charlie, checking in. His building has a meth lab in it, so I told him he could use the condo."

“Does he need anything? Were his things ruined?”

“I don’t know,” Jared answered. “I didn’t ask and he didn’t say.”

“I’ll call him later and see,” Jeff offered thoughtfully. Jared filed the look on his face away. Lately, he had the oddest feeling—it was almost like Jeff had peeked ahead in the chapter and knew something he didn’t.

“Do you want a cup of coffee before I sit down?” Jared asked Jensen.

“That’d be great. Can you add some of the syrup you made?”

“I will. Jeff?”

“Syrup? What syrup?” Jeff frowned.

“Jared made vanilla syrup the other day.”

“I’ll try that, with a little milk.” Jeff held up a hand. “But in no way does this mean I am starting to drink froufrou coffee. It takes a tough man to drink vanilla coffee.”

“Of course it does.” Jensen laughed. “Keep telling yourself that too.”

“You’re the one who brought up the syrup,” Jeff pointed out. “Do you need a hand?”

“I got it.” Jared headed back into the kitchen. He wondered if Jensen realized Jeff was making a point of asking and Jared of refusing. They had agreed that they weren’t going to leave Jensen alone right now, so one of them was always with him. They were just trying to be a little sneaky about it.

He had just started the third cup when his phone chimed with a text. He couldn’t help laughing as he walked over to the counter where he’d set it when he started the coffee. His phone rarely, if ever, rang, and now twice in one day was funny for some reason. Picking it up, he glanced at the ID for the text. It was his agent. Henry usually emailed. He opened the text. *Read your damn email. Now. I mean now. Go. Now—Henry.*

*What’s up?* he texted back as he waited for the last cup to finish.

*Just read your damn email,* Henry replied.

Jared picked up the coffee and carried it into the living room, set it on the table and grabbed his computer. He sat down on the couch and pulled Jensen’s legs over his. It had become their default position in the last few days. The computer was powered off, so he turned it on and waited.

“Something wrong?” Jeff asked with a frown.

“I got a text from my agent. He said to read my damn email.”

“Worded like that?”

“Exactly like that. Henry is a little rough around the edges in some ways.” Jared clicked on the email client he used for professional correspondence and saw the email from the director of HorrorTrifectaCon. It was probably an invitation. He’d known the convention was going to be in Seattle this year and he been more than half-expecting them to try and get him to come as Guest of Honor again. He opened the email and stared at the screen.

“Are you okay?” Jensen asked, laying an ice-cold hand on his arm.

“Uh.” Jared was staring at the email. Even after two reads it still said the same thing. “I think I’m hallucinating.” He handed the laptop to Jeff.

“Holy shit!” Jeff exclaimed a moment later.

“What?” Jensen looked from Jared to Jeff.

“Listen to this ‘Dear Jared, I wanted to email you personally and let you know—before the official announcement goes out—that you have won the Monster of Horror award. The ceremony will be on Sunday of the convention. We hope you can attend, and I will email details of the security we are arranging for you.

Congratulations on your win! We hope to see you soon.’ Holy shit!” Jeff grinned at him. “That makes you the first living author to receive it.”

“It’s usually film or TV that gets it,” Jared acknowledged.

“Congratulations!” Jensen squeezed his arm.

“Thanks. I’m not sure I really believe it.”

“The only other author to win, in fact, was Lovecraft.” Jeff went on. “It’s the highest honor in the genre! I knew you were nominated, but I never really expected you to win. Not that you didn’t deserve it, they just vote against authors.” Jared had to smile. Of course Jeff would know about the award, he kept up on most of the gossip about his favorite authors and had even discovered something about the top secret deal to develop a limited run mini-series based on the *Fallen* novels.

“It’s something I’ve dreamed about, but never thought I’d...” Jared swallowed. His publisher would want him to go, and Henry would be on their side. It was why he’d texted. “They’re going to want me to go,” he said as the thought formed in his head.

“They will,” Jeff agreed reasonably. “How do you feel about that?”

Jared opened his mouth to say there was no way in hell he’d be able to get there, then stopped. “...I don’t know. “

"Makes sense." Jeff nodded seriously.

"I know they'll do a good job with security. Last time they invited me, and that was just for the con, they offered armed guards. I know I could never make it through a whole convention. I can't even believe I'm even thinking about this calmly at all," Jared said honestly.

"Hey." Jensen reached out and took his hand. "Thank you for bringing this up, we're behind whatever decision you make and..." He paused and took a slow breath, like he was fighting something in himself. "If you decide to go, you won't be alone."

"I know, Charlie would go and..."

"No, Jared, I'll be there. No matter what. I *will* be there." There was a weird melancholy in his voice, but after a moment, he smiled. "You think I'd miss that?"

"We'll both be there," Jeff assured him. "If you choose to go. Don't let anyone pressure you if you're not ready, but the fact you're even talking about it is a really good step."

"Thank you." The words seemed a little inadequate for the feeling filling his chest. Jared was quiet for a moment, thinking about what that support meant. That's when he realized Jensen's hand was trembling. "Jensen? Are you okay?"

"Uh, I don't feel really good all of a sudden."

"How not good?" Jeff reached over and laid his hand on Jensen's forehead.

"My heart feels like it's pounding. It's felt that way off and on since I was in the hospital, but this is a lot worse."

"How bad?" Jared put his hand on Jensen's chest, and he could feel the frantic beating of his heart.

"I'm going to get the blood pressure cuff, be right back." Jeff got up and headed towards the bathroom.

The nagging sense of worry that had been dogging him for the last few days was quickly winding up into something else. An alarm bell was starting to blare in the back of Jared's head. He wasn't sure what was causing it. This was more than just worry for Jensen, there was something there telling him something was seriously wrong. He had no idea why. It was like his brain had been working on a puzzle and it was finally putting the pieces together. He was running through things in his head when Jeff returned and put the electronic cuff on Jensen's arm.

"It's low," Jeff said, frowning at the readout.

"Low?" Jared asked, reaching for his laptop. He quickly flipped to a folder of research he'd done for one of the *Devil's Detective* books. He found the file he wanted and quickly scanned the summary of the research he'd put together. What was there terrified him. "Call 911."

"What?"

"Do it, do it now. Tell them to hurry."

## Twenty-One

The soft beep of the monitors and the hiss of the oxygen filled the room. It was warm, a cocooning warmth that was not quite comfortable. In fact, as awareness slowly crept in, Jensen realized there was nothing really comfortable about his body right then. It wasn't at the point of pain yet, but part of him wondered if it would become pain as the world came more into focus. There was a low tone in the background that his brain identified as "safety", but he wasn't sure why or what it was yet.

Memory started trickling back.

Jeff had stayed home from work because he was worried. The hummingbird was rampaging in the backyard attacking anything that came to his preferred feeder, the closest to the front window. They'd been talking about Jeff's theory regarding Jensen's self-harm. Jeff was convinced it was his brain acting out the shame that had been built up about his illness. After producing one of his graphs, Jensen could see the pattern. It made sense, although he wasn't sure it was as comforting as he'd thought finding a potential answer would be. Did that mean it would end? Or would he be haunted by the specter of this every time he had another humiliating run-in with the medical profession?

Jared had come in and the conversation had shifted to discussing the incredible award Jared had won. That's when it began to get out of control. His heart had gone crazy. It had been pounding off and on, a not uncommon occurrence over the last year, but this was different. Like the dragging sense of wrong that had slowly become pervasive. This was not his day-to-day existence. The pounding had increased, not decreased, and he finally said something. While Jeff checked his blood pressure, Jared had his computer open. The next thing he knew, he was in an ambulance, headed for the hospital.

When they arrived, it had been moderately busy, but because he'd come in via ambulance, with a chest pain complaint, he'd been given a room immediately. The nurse went through the usual routine, sounding both bored and annoyed that he was taking up her time. They'd dealt with her before, and she was one of the ones firmly in the "there is nothing wrong with him but drug abuse" club. Jared had been getting increasingly agitated as staff came and went without concern. He was sitting at the head of the bed, his hand on Jensen's chest, as if he didn't trust the many electronics attached to Jensen and was monitoring the painful pounding himself.

The doctor came in and said they were waiting for the blood results to come back, and then they would release him. At that point, Jensen felt so bad, he didn't care. The ache in his body was reaching the agony stage, and of course they refused to give him anything for the pain. He was freezing and had only one small sheet over him, even though both Jeff and Jared had requested a warm blanket more than once. It had been getting increasingly hard to focus on anything. He was slipping, he knew it, he wasn't going to have the chance to see Jared receive the award or anything really. The doctor was on the way out of the room, Jensen just barely aware of his presence now, when Jared's angry voice snapped out. Jensen had no idea what happened after that. He heard Jeff and Jared arguing with the doctor, but it didn't make sense. All he was holding on to was the warmth of Jared's hand on his chest.

Jared.

Jensen had never expected to find friendship after what had happened at the university. The fact he'd found that, let alone... he hesitated on the word, but it was there. Love. Even before Kurtis, even before everything, he'd never expected love. When he was younger, in college, fast-tracking his degrees and watching his friends have relationships, love was never part of the equation. As he grew older and attended weddings and partner ceremonies, he'd never seen himself there. It was not part of his world. Or at least so he thought.

Then came a comment, an email, a phone call and suddenly his days were defined around another person. He looked forward to their calls, to sharing with someone his passion for bad history, cooking shows, real history, and discussing the hummingbirds and other things that inhabited his garden. Even before they spoke on the phone that first time, he looked forward to the emails and the amazing chapters that Jared sent him, based off photos Jensen had posted. Their lives had become intertwined almost without Jensen consciously realizing it. Now he couldn't imagine his life without Jared. When he'd heard himself promise to go with Jared to the convention, he'd been surprised, but letting Jared go alone, not seeing him receive the award, not to share that with him had been unthinkable.

"So, Rick is heading off to the big cave alone," Jared's voice finally broke through the haze. He must be talking about the latest episode of *Cryptozoology Files*. But that couldn't be right, it was on Thursdays, and this was Monday. Wasn't it? "I'm not sure I'd want to head off through the jungle alone at night. And that's a just a plain-old regular jungle, not a jungle cave with bodies hanging from the wall. Wait! What was that? He looks genuinely freaked out. Not the usual Rick being freaked. He looks scared." Jared was quiet for a moment, and Jensen could picture his face, that little frown curled between his eyes. "He's trying to get through to the rest of the crew, but the walkie-talkie isn't working. Huh, what was that?"

"What?" Jensen asked curiously. At least that had been his intention. The word didn't sound like a word at all.



“Jensen? Jensen?” The question was filled with panic and very much unlike the quiet recitation a moment before.

“Yeah?” Jensen replied, but again, it didn’t sound quite right to his ears. He worked on getting his eyes open.

There was the sound of movement beside the bed, two footsteps. “Jeff! I think he’s awake!”

Jensen managed to get his eyes open a crack. He was assaulted by light that was too bright. He blinked to focus and spotted Jared’s tall figure at the door. “Jared?” There. That sounded better.

“Hey,” Jared said, turning from the door. He quickly walked to the bed and picked up Jensen’s hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. His eyes were bright.

“What’s happening with Rick?” Jensen managed to croak out.

Jared started laughing, tears spilling out of his eyes. He bent down and dropped a kiss on Jensen’s forehead.

“I’ll bring you up to date on everything,” he promised. “Now that you’re back.”

Jensen didn’t get a chance to ask what he meant, or really anything else. Jeff arrived with a nurse and doctor right on his heels and the room became contained chaos. Medical staff bustled around. Jeff was asking questions of everyone and through it all, Jared never moved from his place beside the bed, or let go of his hand.

Forty-eight hours later, Jensen was back on the couch in the living room, watching the hummingbird chasing a red-winged blackbird who was determined to sneak sips at hummingbird’s feeder. Jeff was on the phone, arranging for the nurse that would come by to administer IV antibiotics for the next two weeks. Jared had made sure Jensen was comfortable and headed into the kitchen. The stress of the last week was telling on Jared and Jensen felt guilty for adding to it. He’d argued with Jared, and immediately apologized, but he still felt bad about it.

The problem had been Jensen discovered he’d not only been in ICU for several days, but it had been caused by an infection he’d contracted in the hospital. On top of that, the staff had tried to discharge him twice as Jared and Jeff fought for what would turn out to be his life—literally. All of that information coming at him the day after he “woke up” led to a panic attack, then anxiety that set his heart racing and had him hovering at the “flight” setting for hours on end. Jeff, after speaking with several doctors, had arranged his release with nursing coming by the house, because he feared Jensen’s mental state was going to lead to a nervous breakdown. Jeff had finally managed it and Jensen was released. The further he got from the hospital, the more his anxiety dropped. It was still there, hovering under his sternum, but it was better being home.

“Everything’ll be ready in about twenty minutes,” Jared said, walking out of the kitchen, setting a cup of coffee on the table and then sitting down and pulling Jensen’s legs over his lap.

“What are we having?”

“Spaghetti.”

“Sounds awesome.” He took a deep breath. “I love...your spaghetti.”

“Starch is one of my default comfort foods.”

“I never really thought about it, but I think it’s one of mine too. Pasta, potatoes, cookies, cake, they’re all starchy.”

“Exactly.” Jared patted his leg and reached for the remote. “Want to watch something while we wait?”

“*Mysterious History* marathon?”

“Before you start on your quality TV, the nurse will be by in three hours, and then will come at nine and six every day for the course of the meds.” Jeff dropped into his chair by the couch. “The food smells good.”

“It’ll be done in a few minutes. As soon as the bread’s done.”

“You made bread?” Jeff raised his eyebrows.

“Stress relief,” Jared replied.

“Works for me. Mind if I watch with you for a while?” Jeff asked.

Jensen was surprised by the question. Jeff usually headed for his office as soon as *Mysterious History* started. The little flutter of anxiety started to ramp up. Jeff sitting through a program he hated was just one more indication of how close it had been. How badly he’d been treated, and how his words had been ignored. How he’d been dismissed. He’d nearly died because of that.

“Hey,” Jared said softly.

“Sorry.” Jensen tried to get his breathing back under control.

“No need to apologize, Jensen. It’s not your fault, okay?” Jeff said sharply. Jensen knew the anger wasn’t directed towards him.

“Yeah.”

“He’s right. It’s not you, it’s them. And it won’t happen again,” Jared added firmly. “We won’t let it.”

“Right.” Jensen took a slow breath and forced a smile. “Let’s watch some TV.”

The wind was singing through the eaves as another storm blew its way in from the coast. The power had flickered briefly, but hadn't gone out. Jensen was still on the couch. He was reluctant to go upstairs to bed for some reason. Maybe it was the uncomfortable PICC line in his arm, maybe it was just... He wasn't sure. Jeff had gone to bed around ten, after falling asleep in his chair and waking up when his feet slid off the footstool. He mumbled a goodnight and headed towards his room. Jensen looked outside, he could just make out several deer out at the edge of the light.

The scent of baking cookies filled the room. Even though it was late, Jared had gone out to make some after they watched a late-night repeat of *Baking Wars: Cookie Edition*. As he lay there, listening to the sound of Jared fussing in the kitchen, Jensen realized how much that sound had become part of "home." He knew Jared had stayed because Jensen had been ill since Jeff had come home, and then had loaned his apartment to Charlie. Jensen also knew he was in love with Jared, deeply and in a way he had never realized was possible. It was an emotion that made him want to keep Jared with him, but also knew he could let him leave. The thing was, Jensen didn't want him to leave and he thought Jared should know that.

Jensen pushed himself up and grabbed his cane before making his way slowly towards the kitchen. He paused in the doorway, Jared had the refrigerator open and was reaching for something. He must have found what he was looking for. He kicked the door closed and turned around, a carton of cream and a jar of jam in his hands. He glanced towards Jensen smiled, then frowned.

"Should you be up?" he asked as he set the items he had on the counter.

"I was worried you were in here eating warm, just-out-of-the-oven cookies without me," Jensen joked.

"That was my plan. I was going to make up for it by making whipped cream with strawberry jam."

"I knew it! I better come in and keep an eye on you." Jensen took a step away from the doorway and abruptly realized it had taken far more energy to get from the couch to the kitchen than usual. His legs were trembling as he took a step, trying to keep the weakness and pain off his face. He was so focused on making it to his chair at the island that he didn't realize Jared was there until he started to fall, and strong hands caught him. Without thinking about it, he let his cane drop to the ground and leaned against Jared.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to let you go," Jared said softly—and Jensen heard it, the fierce undercurrent in the gentle voice. That simple statement meant more than the words.

Jensen pulled away only far enough so he could look up into Jared's face. What he saw there took his breath away. It was everything that was in his own heart painted there on the other man's face and shining in his eyes. "I don't want you to leave," Jensen blurted out. Somehow those words he'd been thinking about were all he could get out of his mouth, even though he wanted to say so much more. "Jared..."

"Jensen," Jared said at the same moment.

"You first."

"You first."

Jared laughed softly and lifted his hand to cup Jensen's face, tracing his cheekbone with his thumb. "I don't want to leave." He smiled, his eyes bright. "I can't imagine a day without you in it."

"I never thought my life was missing anything," Jensen began. "Then one day you commented on a picture and..." He stopped and started again. "Suddenly the silence I hadn't even realized was there was broken." And *that* sounded a little sappier than it had in his head.

"I love you, too." Jared bent forward and kissed him on the end of his nose.

Jensen put his hand on the back of Jared's head, letting the silky hair run over his fingers and pulled Jared down, taking his mouth in a kiss that Jared returned with equal passion. How long they stayed there, Jensen wasn't sure. He was lost in the taste of Jared's mouth, the heat of his hands as he both caressed and supported. They finally broke apart when the timer on the oven beeped.

Jensen pulled away with a reluctant sigh. "You finish that, I'll meet you in the living room."

"Can you make it on your own?"

"I can." Jensen waited as Jared handed him his cane and helped him as far as the door. He heard the hand mixer as he reached the couch and sat down. Thinking about what had happened in the kitchen, he was in a happy state of not-quite shock. He sat there, the kiss still tingling on his lips and the phantom pressure of Jared's hands buzzing through his body. If it wasn't for the fact the walk had exhausted him—and he had a PICC line in his arm, his brain added sourly—he would want more, to take it further than a kiss, than a gentle caress. That would come in time, he wasn't worried about that.

Jared came into the room carrying the cookies and a small bowl. He set them on the table and looked at Jensen with a question in his eyes. Jensen patted the couch beside him—"his" end of the couch. Jared's smile was blinding as he dropped into the corner of the couch and pulled Jensen in for another kiss before turning and cradling him

against his chest. He reached out and picked up a cookie, used it like a chip to scoop up some of the cream and handed it to Jensen.

Jensen managed to finish a cookie before exhaustion caught up with him. He leaned into Jared, accepting the comfort that was offered and so much more. He was aware of movement, Jared must have reached for his phone.

“Jared?” Jensen asked, not wanting to move, but needing to make sure everything was okay.

“I just texted Charlie,” Jared said quietly. “He’s going to arrange to have my things packed and moved down here in the morning.”

“You sure?” Jensen opened his eyes and met Jared’s, even before the other man spoke he knew.

“Absolutely,” Jared replied. He leaned down for a quick, chaste kiss, then pulled Jensen back against him, tugging the blankets over them and wrapping his arms around Jensen.

Jensen lay there, not wanting to sleep yet. There was a sense of safety, of comfort, he was unwilling to give up just yet, even though sleep was tugging at him. He listened to the TV; *Battleground: Cupcake* was on. It was repeat, one that he and Jared had watched together sometime before. The wind had lost some of its fury, the sound of the rain on the patio was now louder than the wind. Over all the other rest, offering a soft counterpoint, a gentle reminder of how things had changed, was Jared’s even breathing. The sounds that once would have left him feeling bereft and alone—the TV and the wind—now were the sounds of a world that was full. The awful stillness was gone and in its place was something new. Something that felt like life.