

Words by tsuki-no-bara: <http://tsuki-no-bara.livejournal.com/1748884.html>

Art by petite-madame: <http://smallworld-inc.livejournal.com/27263.html>



Jared's first clue that it's going to be an interesting day is the twenty-something guy on the C train wearing sneakers, a green ski jacket, and what look suspiciously like Chicago Blackhawks boxer shorts. It's January and not exactly pants-free weather. Jared wonders if the guy's from Canada. He himself is bundled up – henley, sweater, jeans, wool socks, boots, winter coat, hat, scarf, gloves. He's been in New York ten years, ever since he came up here for college, and has fully absorbed the first law of the northeastern winter, which is *Worry about how warm you'll be walking to the subway, not how stupid you'll look doing so.*

Boxer shorts guy gets off at 59th Street. Jared continues on to 96th, gets off, walks a couple of blocks, and delivers his first book – J Maarten Troost's *The Sex Lives of Cannibals* – to a nice pre-war building with a doorman. Then it's back on the subway, down to 59th, change trains, go across town, and get off at 63rd and Lexington to make the next delivery – two biographies of Robert E Lee and an illustrated companion book to Patrick O'Brien's novels – to, surprisingly, a liquor store that isn't even open yet. Fortunately someone's inside to unlock the door and take the books.

He sees three more people without pants on the D train as he's heading back to his bookstore – two girls and another guy, all of them more or less dressed for the weather except for the fact that they're walking around in their underwear. And then he realizes that it must be No-Pants Day, when people drop trou to ride the subway. Chad participated in that their senior year of college, and his uncontrollable tendency to hit on pretty girls earned him an actual slap, as well as some laughter and a fair amount of pointed ignoring. Jared was too self-conscious about his legs at the time and just went along for moral support, or backup in case Chad did something he couldn't talk his way out of.

Jared pulls out his phone and texts Chad:

It's No-Pants Day! Are you riding the subway in your fanciest underwear? :)

The three pantsless people get off at 14th Street and Chad texts back:

I'm not wearing any underwear, Moose. Or anything else.

Jared takes that to mean that Chad has finally convinced the girl he's been chasing to sleep with him.

Good for him, I guess, Jared thinks. He doesn't have a very high opinion of the girl, or Chad's determined attempts to get her to go out with him, but Chad has never listened to him about women as long as they've known each other. Which is probably fair, considering Jared never listens to Chad about men.

The sun is shining and the temperature might conceivably be rising when Jared gets off the subway at 4th Street and heads towards Bleeker Street and his bookstore. There are people strolling here and there, walking their dogs, maybe going to brunch. He'll take Sadie to the dog run at Union Square Park later. He doesn't expect to see David and Mars the Wonder Mutt – Sundays are goof-off-with-the-kid-all-day day in David's household – but if he goes early enough he might see Mark and his two fat, spoiled pugs.

The bookstore, quite surprisingly, is a zoo. Genevieve has just gotten in and already looks harried, and AJ seems to be trying to convince a couple with two kids that no, there's no story time today, the store doesn't even do that, did they try the library? The couple is having none of it and the kids are only barely held in check. A middle-aged woman in a bright pink coat keeps trying to interrupt and the couple keeps giving her Looks.

Jared is suddenly profoundly grateful that Sadie is still up in the apartment, and not down in the store.

"Jared!" Genevieve cries. "Just in time! The card reader went down!"

Shit.

"What do you mean, it went down?" he asks, maneuvering himself behind the counter and shedding his scarf and coat and gloves onto the floor.

"It's not reading." She gestures for the first customer in line to swipe a credit card to demonstrate the problem. "It won't let people enter their card number, either. We can't just put up a sign saying 'We only take cash'."

"Why not?" Jared is already rummaging around for a piece of paper to do just that.

"No one carries cash any more," the customer offers. "Do you have a swipe attachment for your phone?"

"No."

"You should."

"Osric does," Genevieve says. "But he's not in today. I unplugged it and plugged it back in, but that

didn't do anything."

"Did you call the company?"

"I was about to when you got here."

"I'm here now." He turns to the customer. She actually seems to be fairly patient, but the three people behind her are grumbling. "I'm sorry about this," he tells her. "Your book's sixteen thirty-three, and I can ring you up if you have cash or you want to pay by check."

She plops her bag on the counter and rummages through it. It's big and red and apparently contains everything except maybe a small kitchen sink. The man in line behind her says something rude and impatient to the man behind him – Jared can hear the tone of voice but not the words – and huffs out of the store. The woman with the bag finally retrieves her wallet and pulls out a twenty.

"You're lucky," she says. "This never happens at McNally Jackson."

"We're a lot smaller than McNally Jackson," Genevieve says.

Jared takes the twenty, rings up the woman's book – a not-very-thick collection of essays on architecture – and sends her on her way. He announces to the store at large and the two people still waiting to buy their books in particular that the card reader is temporarily down and for now they're just accepting cash or check.

"If you want to put your books aside and come back later to charge them, you can," he adds, and the next man in line does just that.

By now Genevieve seems to have reached someone helpful on the phone and is scribbling something down on the back of a store postcard. She elbows Jared out of the way, unplugs the card reader again, plugs it back in, and starts pushing buttons.

No one else has the cash to make their purchases. Jared goes to help AJ.

Genevieve manages to get the card reader to work, and the store continues to be pretty busy. AJ goes home, Kim comes in for her shift, Genevieve takes a break to walk around the neighborhood for twenty minutes. At four-thirty Jared realizes Sadie is still upstairs, probably hungry and thirsty and in desperate need of some love and attention. He tells Kim he'll be back at seven, puts all his winter weather gear back on, and goes to get her.

It's starting to get dark and it's still cold out but not brutally so. Sadie doesn't seem to care. She almost gets into it with an aggressive chihuahua in a blue fleece coat, much to the embarrassment of the chihuahua's owner, but Jared hauls her down the sidewalk and away. They walk up to the dog run, but no one he knows is there, and Sadie doesn't seem interested, so they just keep going.

They're gone for about forty minutes, and by the time they get back to the store things seem to have calmed down. Jared sticks his head in just to make sure everything is okay – and the card reader is still working – and so Sadie can say hello to Kim, and then goes up to his apartment. He has dirty laundry and dirty dishes, he's hungry, and there's probably football on somewhere. If there's a problem Kim will

call him.

The bookstore downstairs is called The Moose and Mayhem, and it belongs to him. He worked there when he was in college at NYU. A couple of years after he graduated, when the man who owned it decided to sell it and retire, Jared and Chad and two of their friends scraped together their savings, took out loans, borrowed from friends and relatives, and bought it. A year later the two friends had sold their shares, and Jared and Chad ended up splitting ownership 75/25 and renaming it in their own honor. Chad stays on mostly as business consultant and accountant. It's only been The Moose and Mayhem for three years, and people still call for the former owner, or ask for it by its old name.

It's hard work and it takes up almost all his time – even when he's not there, he's at least half thinking about it - but Jared wouldn't exchange the store for anything.

The one thing that separates The Moose and Mayhem from every other small independent bookstore in New York is that it's the only twenty-four hour bookstore in the five boroughs. Jared is ridiculously proud of the fact that he's been able to maintain those absurd hours for three years. It means he works a lot of overnights, but so far, he doesn't mind. He's still young. He can live on five hours of sleep a day. Sadie regularly hangs out in the store. Not right now, because it's a zoo and that will make her crazy, but later he might bring her down for a few hours so they can keep each other company.

Besides, one of the cops who patrol the neighborhood in the wee hours likes dogs, and it never hurt to have a local cop think kindly of you.

At seven Jared puts all his outdoor gear back on – it's only three steps from the entryway that leads up to his apartment and the bookstore door, but you never know when you might have to run an errand – clips Sadie's leash onto her collar, and goes back downstairs.

"The card reader's still reading," Kim tells him. "Business was good. You have three orders for tomorrow." She shows him the slips of paper. "We didn't get any dogs although someone did bring in a cat on a leash, no little kids peed in the corner, Genevieve broke up a fight, and if you check our Instagram you'll see a new picture of Osric without any pants on."

"Um," Jared says.

"No-Pants Day."

"I knew that. I saw some people on the subway when I was delivering orders."

"January is such a silly month to do that." She shakes her head, amused at the weird ideas people have. "I wouldn't ride around bare-legged in this cold."

"Would you ride around bare-legged in the summer?"

"I have." She grins.

"You're here until eight, right? I need a coffee. You want one? I can get you decaf."

"No, I'm good." She takes Sadie's leash. "If you go to Rocco's, I'll take a black and white cookie."

One overpriced coffee, one black and white cookie, one cream puff, and two hours later, Jared and Sadie are alone in the store. Sadie lies down next to the counter. Jared orders the three books from earlier, resorts the books behind the counter waiting to be picked up, and makes sure the schedule for the rest of the week looks okay. He checks the store's Instagram account and chuckles at Ostric's No-Pants Day subway photo.

It's cold behind the counter so he pulls on the knitted beanie that Blonde Sam made him for Christmas. The Sams – one blonde, one brunette – are both nurses at St Vincent's Hospital, and when they've got the graveyard shift they'll frequently stop by the store on their way back to their respective homes. Blonde Sam is a knitter.

It's always a little weird being in the store late at night, even when customers call or come in, but it gives Jared a chance to catch up on business things and straighten the place up. Today was busy, so the shelves are a mess. Sadie follows him as he fixes the children's books. Eventually she gets bored, lies down in front of the biographies, and starts to snore. She has a very delicate snore.

At eleven he takes her for a quick walk so she can pee and then upstairs so she can sleep on a bed. He has to hang the little sign just inside the door that says "Gone for a minute, be right back", in case someone wanders by and wants to buy something.

Jared isn't expecting anyone – Sunday nights during the winter are generally slow – and is surprised when someone comes in. He's even more surprised that it's someone he's met before.

"Hey, I know you," he says. "Danny's friend. Boss. Danny's boss."

"Yeah," the someone says. "And you're... sorry, I forgot your name."

"Jared. You're Jensen, right?"

"Right." The someone – Jensen – glances around the store. Jared gets a good look at his profile, his freckles, and the heather gray knitted fisherman's cap pulled over his ears. Jared remembers from the one time they met that Jensen has an almost weathered-pretty face, green eyes, and broad shoulders. The shoulders look even broader now under his navy peacoat, and there's a black scarf wrapped around his neck.

"I remembered that you work here," Jensen says.

"Actually I own here." Jared grins. "You didn't know that?" He tells everyone he meets about The Moose and Mayhem.

"Wait, you did tell me, sorry. It was kind of a busy day."

A week ago Genevieve and her girlfriend Danneel threw an afternoon party at the bar where Danneel works. The bar owners closed the place to customers, but it was still a party and they still had to make sure everyone was happy and had enough to eat and drink, and that the music wasn't too intrusive.

As one of the owners, Jensen would have indeed been pretty busy, although not so busy that he couldn't

take some time to meet his bartender's girlfriend's boss, or have a conversation with him. A short conversation, but apparently enough for Jensen to remember the bookstore.

"So what brings you all the way out to the Village?" Jared asks. He doesn't know where Jensen lives, but the bar is in Brooklyn.

"I'm not quite ready to go home." Jensen yawns. "Tired, but not ready to go home. We had a band at the bar tonight and those are always a little more work." He shrugs. "It made sense when I left."

"You want a book? I mean, you're here." Helping customers find the thing they want or the thing they didn't even know they needed is one of his favorite parts of the job.

"What makes you think I don't have a Kindle?" Jensen grins.

"Then you could get something for someone else."

"All right." Jensen yawns again. "Sorry. Something that will keep me awake. You don't have a history of the coffee bean, do you?"

"We might have a history of coffee shops."

Jared walks out from behind the counter and leads Jensen through the shelves to the history section, past the stories of wars and empires and the men and women who shaped world events, all the way to the end where the weird specialized "history of things" books live.

"How do you feel about fish?" Jared asks, pulling out Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*. He read it recently, enjoyed it, and is now invested in selling it to other people. Since he doesn't yet know enough about Jensen to be able to target his book-selling, cod is as good a place to start as any.

"Someone wrote a history of cod," Jensen says, sounding unimpressed. "Why?"

"It changed the world. It's pretty cool, the impact one little fish can have. Did you know there's a big wooden cod hanging in the Massachusetts State House, in Boston? It's the Sacred Cod. Because fishing was so important in the state's early days. A bunch of students codnapped it in the 30s. It was a huge deal. The cops found it eventually, though. I think someone tipped them off."

"How do you know that? I thought you were from Texas."

That only came up at the party because Jared was wearing an orange knit Longhorns hat.

"Well, I read the book. But I know a lot of trivial shit," he says proudly. "I read a lot."

"I'm not surprised." Jensen looks around the bookstore, at the shelves and tables stacked with books, at the display up front showing an assortment of recommendations for the new year, at the notebooks and blank books and mugs with literary quotations, the small rack of maps and atlases and the marked-down calendars, the little cards hanging from the shelves with staff recommendations written on them. "There probably isn't a lot to do here late at night."

"You'd be surprised." Jared takes Jensen over to the used-book section, which was last organized in alphabetical order by author, regardless of book title or subject. Jared wasn't around the day AJ was alone in the store and apparently very, very bored. Hopefully the random assortment of books will help him figure out what Jensen likes, because they're not looking at any one genre. "I should probably fix this eventually, because no one can ever find anything. But it's good for browsing, so I don't know."

Jensen pulls out a hardback at random - a biography of Sitting Bull - and flips through it. "You get a lot of college kids?"

"Yeah, they come in at weird hours, especially around finals and midterms. They're all awake studying or writing essays, and they'll realize 'Oh shit, I need to know about Greek vases, or the War of 1812, or the Harlem Renaissance, or aboriginal art, or Hinduism, or Sharon Olds', so they come in at three in the morning, panicking. The libraries are all closed and their professors will know if they crib from Wikipedia. Where else are they gonna go?"

"Can you help them?" Jensen puts the biography back on the shelf.

"I try to. Sometimes they just need to go somewhere to calm down. It's really quiet in here at three in the morning. Finals are stressful, you know? I get people who work second or third shift, on their way to or from home. There's a couple of nurses at St Vincent's who come by when they get off work. People don't even always want to buy anything - sometimes they just need to have a chat somewhere quiet for ten minutes. There's a cop at the 6th Precinct who'll stop in to say hi, just to get off the street for a little bit and talk to someone who isn't drunk or peeing on the sidewalk. He likes my dog."

"You have a dog?" Jensen asks, looking around the store and not seeing her.

"Sadie. She's upstairs. Sometimes I'll get someone who just finished the first or second book in a series and needs the next one right now. They can't wait. I love those people. Even Amazon's no use when you get to the end of your book and it's a cliffhanger, and you have to know what happens *right this second*. So you come to me." He beams.

"I don't need anything. I'm too busy to read."

"That's too bad. You should make time. What else are you gonna do when you're stuck on the subway? Although today you could have watched the people riding the train without their pants on."

"What?"

"It's No-Pants Day," Jared explains. "I saw a couple people on the train in their underwear."

"Clearly I don't take the subway enough," Jensen says, shaking his head in amusement. "Usually only when I have to go to Queens and my roommate has the car. Or tonight."

"So what do you do when you're stuck on the train to Queens?"

"Recently? Text about work. Listen to clips from bands that we might want to book. Look at photographers' online galleries. Read up on new and exciting developments in the world of small-batch

craft bourbon."

"Then you might like this. Over here." Now that he has a clue as to Jensen's potential literary interests, Jared drags him across the store to the cookbook section, at the end of which are the books on beer and cocktails. "A reproduction of *The Savoy Cocktail Book*. Classic. Unless you already have it."

"I don't think so. There are a bunch of bartending guides and cocktail books in the office, though, just stuff we've collected over the years, so it might be there. What's this one?" He fingers a red spine with the title printed in an old-fashioned typeface, then pulls out the book and opens it. "*Jerry Thomas' Bartenders Guide: How to Mix Drinks, 1862 Reprint*," he reads from the inside cover. "That's cool."

"You probably don't have that one."

"We certainly don't." Jensen starts reading through it and Jared, feeling like he might be intruding, and unable to comment on the book because he hasn't read it, leaves him to it.

Twenty minutes later Jared is straightening up the travel books when Jensen comes over with the reproduction bartender's guide and says he'll buy it.

"That was easy," Jared says, ringing it up and sticking a store bookmark inside it.

"I might be very easily convinced when I'm this tired. I don't need a bag. I'll read it on the subway."

"I told you, the subway's a great place to read for fun. The bus, too. You can read for work at work."

"Well, when I'm at work I'm working."

"Just try it."

"I need to stay awake somehow, anyway. Thanks." He grins. His eyes crinkle at the corners and suddenly he's even cuter than when he first came in. "Good night, or good morning, I guess. Take care." And he leaves.

The next afternoon Jared gets an email.

To: moose@mooseandmayhem.com

From: jackles@twobrothersnyc.com

Subj: Last night

Hey. Chris loves the bartender's guide from 1862. I think he's going to start picking cocktails at random to try on unsuspecting customers. We don't have the Savoy cocktail book, so I guess I'll just have to come back one night and get it.

Jensen (who started reading for fun on the train)

There's really only one reply to that:

To: jackles@twobrothersnyc.com

From: moose@mooseandmayhem.com

Subj: Re: Last night

Let me know if you make anything from Jerry Thomas. I can put the Savoy aside for you if you want. :)

Jared

He takes *The Savoy Cocktail Book* off the shelf, writes Jensen's name and "Danny's boss" on a slip of paper, sticks it inside the cocktail guide, and puts the book behind the counter with everything else that's waiting to be either picked up or delivered. There's no guarantee Jensen will actually come back for it, but Jared hopes he does. It never hurt to be prepared.



Two Brothers Bar (Red Hook's finest purveyors of bourbon, beer, and country bands) is locked and quiet at three in the afternoon, aside from the discussion going on at a table near the tiny stage.

"No," Jensen says, for what feels like the tenth time.

"Yes," says Chris, his best friend and business partner. "Audrey's is closing. We can expand into the space and use their kitchen."

Audrey's is the bakery next door. The owner has been saying for almost a year that he's going to close the place, and, as Jensen points out, the bakery is still open.

"Just because it's closing doesn't mean the space doesn't already have a new tenant," he adds.

"It doesn't. I asked."

"Who, Eric or the landlord?"

"Both. Eric didn't resign his lease and Bob's still looking for the right tenant."

"And you think that's us."

"Yes I do. Look, you can come with me to talk to the bank if it will make you happy. We already have some of the money for it, we've got the collateral for a loan, and think of the extra business we can do. We'll make it back in no time."

"You just want to cook for people."

Chris beams. Jensen sighs. He's looked at the books. He knows exactly how much money the bar makes in any given month, and he knows where most of that money comes from and where it goes.

They already have a kitchen, and while it's more the suggestion of a kitchen than anything else, so far it's served them just fine. They don't have a large food menu because they don't need one.

Two Brothers has made a local name for itself for its selection of bourbons, whiskeys, and beers, even in a city full to the brim with places to drink small-batch liquor and obscure craft beer. As a bonus it has a country-western honky-tonk vibe and at least a couple of times a week there's live music, and every other week they have line-dancing. It has regulars. It's finally running (barely) in the black. Jensen wants to savor this for a year or two before they start adding a bigger kitchen, a full menu, and a full-time cook, before they start trying to sell themselves as a place to eat well, not just drink well.

Besides, they're still a little off the beaten path. The bar is just off Van Brunt, which is as much of a main drag as Jensen thinks Red Hook has, and there's not a lot of public transportation to this corner of Brooklyn. No one is going to walk by on the way home from work, look in the window, and think *This would be a great place for dinner*.

But Chris will not be swayed. He's put a lot of work into this idea. But he needs to put a lot more work into it before it's viable.

"Fine," Jensen sighs, "I'll go with you to talk to the bank. And Seth."

Seth is their accountant by virtue of being Chris' friend and having offered to look over their finances for free.

"Seth says we're good," Chris tells Jensen reassuringly. "He'll even come to the bank with us and ask the questions we don't know to ask. This is all preliminary, really. I just need you to be okay with it."

"I think I'm okay with it. But you manage the kitchen and the bands. I'll manage the bar."

"Fantastic!" Chris slams both hands on the table in excitement. "I'll get right on it." He jumps up and vanishes into the office in back.

Jensen still isn't completely convinced. But he can't deny that Chris' excitement is contagious.

The bar doesn't open until five, but Alona shows up at four to get ready for her shift and to mess around with new and interesting drink recipes.

"Try this," she tells Jensen, handing him a tall collins glass full of something bright blue over ice.

"What is it?" Jensen asks, eyeing it dubiously. The blue is most likely curaçao, unless she snuck in some food coloring, but he knows there has to be more to it.

"It's a surprise."

It tastes fruity, minty, and blue. "Let Chris try it," he says.

"Do you like it?"

"The mint's a little weird. Give it an interesting garnish and you can make it the mystery drink of the

week. Does it have a name?"

"Not if it's the mystery drink." She grins. Jensen takes another sip. "I was thinking pineapple and a Maraschino cherry with a little paper umbrella. Kind of retro."

"This isn't just a resurrected tiki bar cocktail from one of the drink guides, is it? It tastes like we should be serving it in one of those glasses that looks like a Polynesian head."

Alona snorts. "Give me some credit. Besides, tiki bars didn't do mint."

Jensen shrugs, drinks some more, and hands the glass back. "Audrey's next door is closing," he says, to change the subject, "and Chris wants to move into their space and open a kitchen. I thought I should warn you."

"Cool." Alona sips the cocktail. "I always thought we should serve real food. He's not here, though."

"Chris? Yeah, I know. It's my night to watch you guys." Now it's his turn to grin. He and Chris trade off nights being in charge. Chris spends his off nights playing with a couple of bands, and Jensen spends his taking pictures.

He has made a concerted effort to find other things to do with his time besides Two Brothers, just so he won't go nuts. He'd wanted to major in photography in college, but had been talked out of it under the assumption that there wasn't any money there unless you were very lucky, and did he really want to spend his life taking pictures of other people's weddings? Or traveling to violent, unstable parts of the world as a photojournalist? He'd gone into physical therapy instead, and he was interning at a sports rehabilitation facility and bartending on the side for extra money when Chris moved to New York, started managing a bar, and convinced him to move up here.

Lots of sports injuries, Chris said. Lots of medical rehab. Lots of bars. Lots of me.

Jensen was in Houston at the time and not interested in staying in Texas forever, and Chris was very persuasive. But good physical rehab jobs were hard to find, especially if you didn't know anyone. Jensen didn't, and he was considering moving again when Chris suggested they open a bar together.

Sometimes Jensen thinks it's the best decision he ever made. Sometimes he thinks he should've laughed in Chris' face and gone back home.

Tonight, he thinks the bar was a good idea. The place is reasonably full, but not too crowded to breathe. The Ginger Girls' Club must have changed their meeting night, because there are three redheaded women sitting at the end of the bar chatting about Donna Noble (Jensen recognizes her name because his ex liked to watch "Dr Who") and drinking Red Stripe out of bottles.

"You know it's not really red, right?" he asks them.

"We know," one of them says. He doesn't know her name but thinks her accent is Scottish. It's freezing cold out but she's only wearing a t-shirt, a green one with a drawing of a Dalek on it. It must be a "Dr Who" night tonight.

"You don't have the red beer any more," another Ginger Girl says, almost accusingly. She's there every week and he knows her name – Felicia – because after a month of regular visits, she introduced herself. "We're going to start drinking somewhere else."

"Promises, promises," Jensen teases her. "How about some chips and dip? We have beet chips this week, just for you."

"You do love us!"

"You bring pretty girls every week to anchor one end of my bar. Of course I do." Jensen grins at them and goes into the tiny kitchen to assemble a basket of multicolored root vegetable chips and hummus.

He likes the Ginger Girls. He likes having regulars, just in general, but the Ginger Girls are well-behaved and fun and friendly and good tipplers. Not all of them show up every week, and they keep changing their minds about what they drink, so they keep him on his toes. A month ago they brought a Ginger Guy, but usually they're all women.

Alona has to leave at midnight so Jensen closes up by himself. He finds a note from Alona in the office as he's making sure everything is ready for tomorrow – "Danny told me you visited Genevieve's boss! Is he as cute as you expected?" written on the back of an envelope in her terrifyingly neat print. He rolls his eyes.

"There are no secrets in this place, are there," he sighs. Jared must have told Genevieve, who must have told Danneel, who has probably told the entire bar. Chris hasn't said anything, but Chris is also consumed with adding a kitchen and dining space and expanding the bar's mission statement to include food. He's never been interested in matchmaking.

Danneel, however, has spent some quality time over the past eight months trying to set Jensen up with an assortment of her single friends and her friends' single friends. She'll be impossible if she finds out Jensen remembered Jared and went to the bookstore specifically to see him. Jensen hadn't lied to Jared, though, when he said he couldn't remember his name or that he actually owned the bookstore. He just remembered "tall, Texan, cute, and funny" and "Moose and Mayhem" and "open twenty-four hours".

"You people need a hobby that isn't my love life," Jensen adds. He puts on his coat and hat and gloves, locks up the bar, and goes home.

He's wondering if he should call a cab or risk a walk in the bitter cold when it occurs to him that aside from the one night he went to The Moose and Mayhem and bought the reproduction cocktail book, he hasn't really taken Jared's advice to spend his occasional public transit time with a good book. Is that a legitimate reason to go back to the store and see its cute owner? He could claim a lack of reading material.

He knows what his bartenders would say, if he were to ask them. He and his now-ex Matt broke up eight months ago, and part of their problem was the difference in hours. Matt worked a fairly conventional 9-5 job. Jensen had to be at the bar at least three, and usually four, nights a week, and sometimes didn't get home until almost morning. His life would be more compatible with the kind of person who owns an all-night bookstore.

He rolls his eyes at himself. What is he thinking? He's just started to miss having a boyfriend – not just someone to sleep with, or sleep next to, but someone to be stupid with and someone to talk about work with. He misses being with someone whose paychecks he doesn't sign. But he has that with his friends, the few he ever gets to see, and he has that with Chris, and is he really ready to start dating again? He certainly hasn't clicked with any of the guys Danneel has set him up with.

He's pretty sure Jared is single. He's almost positive Jared is gay. If he really needs to know, he can find out.

It doesn't matter right now, anyway. He has other, more immediately pressing, things to think about. There's Chris' new and exciting ideas for expansion, and tomorrow a brewery rep is coming by, and he and Chris need to talk about the band that was booked for next Thursday but had to cancel. At some point he'd like to get to the photography studio he shares out in Queens.

And he really should take Jared's advice and start reading for fun on the train.

A couple of months later he's sitting on the F train to Manhattan at a ridiculous hour of the night, reading *The Big Sleep*, which he borrowed from Alona. He's not that far along but he's liking it so far. Noir novels are so bleak, so cynical, but there's something about their harsh world view and their genre conventions and spare language that he enjoys. Maybe it's because his own life is so different, so it's as if he can peek into another world and appreciate how well it's put together without having to relate to it or to see himself in the protagonist.

He tells Jared as much when he gets to The Moose and Mayhem, because Jared notices that he's carrying a book! He must be reading for fun! On the train!

"You say that like I haven't been doing it since January," Jensen says, feigning annoyance. Jared just grins. "You're a good influence."

"I try. How's the bar?"

"Busy. We're putting in a new kitchen, but construction won't start for a few weeks. You should see all the research Chris is doing for the menu. I keep telling him it's just dinner, he doesn't have to visit every single speakeasy and gastropub and bar-that-serves-food in Brooklyn, and he just tells me to shut up." He shrugs. "There's a great barbecue place down the street from us, so at least he knows not to copy them. We've still been three times for 'research'. I think he likes doing it, to be honest. He gets to talk to food professionals about food. I can't do that and I don't really want to."

"How long until you can open for dinner?" Jared walks out from behind the counter and heads for the mystery/suspense/horror novels, beckoning for Jensen to follow.

"Not for a month or two. We've started to put the word out, though, like advance warning. Early press."

"I saw. I'm following you on Facebook now." Jared starts going through the section, rearranging the books and putting them back in order. "I don't know what happened here, but this section is a total mess."

"You're following the bar on Facebook?"

"Yeah. Why not? You follow us." He squints at the row of Ks, then pulls out a copy of Stephen King's *On Writing*. "What's this doing here?" It's clearly a rhetorical question, because he sticks it under his arm and keeps going down the shelves.

"Well," Jensen says, grinning, "you know, I need recommendations for things to read while I'm sitting on the train at really late hours."

Jared chuckles. "If you want more noir suggestions, I should send you to AJ, although he's more of a horror guy. It's not really my thing. I know, I know, I sell books for a living and don't like everything."

"I don't like vodka drinks," Jensen offers. "Tom had a bad tequila experience in college and doesn't drink it any more. Danneel doesn't really like beer."

"She works in a bar and she doesn't like beer?" Jared turns away from the shelves and stares at Jensen in disbelief.

"Weird, right? When we bring in something new she'll try it, just so she knows what to tell customers, but if she has a choice she's rather have a mixed drink. Or a Maker's Mark, straight up."

Which makes sense. They're a bourbon bar, after all.

"Huh," Jared says, going back to his rearranging.

Jensen watches him fix the shelves, thinking idly about how nice it is to just be able to stand next to someone and watch them work in companionable silence. Two Brothers is never really quiet. Even when he's there by himself, he has the radio or the jukebox on. The Moose and Mayhem is calm and quiet at nearly four in the morning, and he can really appreciate that.

And it's very pleasant to be in the same space as Jared and not have to talk. Jensen spends his days and nights talking to people, a lot of them strangers, and sometimes he just wants to hang out with someone and not feel like either of them needs to speak.

"What are you thinking?" Jared asks, finally reaching the end of the section and moving away to reshelve *On Writing*.

"Just that it's quiet in here and I like it," Jensen says. "I talk to people all night. I love my job – you might have to remind me of that once the kitchen's in – but being around people all the time can be exhausting."

"I like being around people. It's always weird when the college kids go home for break, because I'm so used to them coming in at night. During the summer I get kids who are here for summer session, though, so that's okay. But spring break is kinda quiet. That was last week. They're back now."

"I could really get into doing your job."

"You wanna trade?" Jared finds a spot for *On Writing* and slides it onto the shelf, then turns and grins at Jensen.

Jesus Christ, he's cute, Jensen thinks, sudden and incongruous. Not that it's a thought he hasn't had before. Repeatedly. One of the reasons he keeps coming back here, even though he's always tired and knows he should go home instead, is because he really likes Jared's face. And Jared's shoulders, which are right now pulling his shirt as he stretches. And Jared's long legs. And Jared's hands.

"Maybe not," Jared says now, answering his own question as he heads back towards the counter. "I don't know anything about mixing drinks."

"And I don't know anything about selling books. I'd still have to talk to people, if I had your job."

"Yeah, you would." Jared leans against the counter, still grinning.

"You should come to the bar sometime," Jensen blurts out. "Let me make you something. I'm always coming here. You should come to me."

"I don't know if I have time. No one else can come in late, that's why I do it."

"You don't have to come at night. Just think about it."

"Okay." It might be Jensen's imagination, but it seems to him as if Jared's grin changes slightly, from something open and cheerful and a little teasing to something more contemplative and even bashful.

Jensen doesn't want to examine it too closely, but it feels like a private moment they're sharing. Then he yawns, changing the atmosphere yet again.

"I should probably go home," he says, stifling another yawn. "I didn't realize I was this tired."

"Not a bad idea. I don't think you want to sleep on my floor."

"Not really, no." Jensen holds up Alona's copy of *The Big Sleep*. "At least I have something to entertain me on the subway, so I don't nod off on the way home."

"Chandler's good for that."

"I'll talk to you later. I'll tell Chris you're stalking us on Facebook." Now it's his turn to grin, and Jared laughs.

"Oh, like you're not stalking us back. Go home. Go to bed." He waves Jensen out.

Jensen doesn't fall asleep on the train, but he can't make himself read either. But he's thinking about Jared, who's more interesting than Raymond Chandler anyway.



The advent of spring seems to bring out the social in people, Jared thinks, maneuvering Sadie around all the Greenwich Village residents and occasional students and the odd tourist clogging the sidewalk between his apartment and the dog run in Union Square Park. Everyone seems to want to say hi to his dog. Not that he minds, but the dog run isn't around the corner and at some point he'd like to actually get there so he can turn her loose and chat with his dog run friends.

It's a nice day and feels like Sunday, only because the crowds of people make him think everyone is out going to brunch at the same time. The dog run thankfully has the same small group of people who are always there on weekday mornings, and Jared waves to the dog owners he recognizes before taking off Sadie's leash and finding Mark and David sitting on a bench. Mark plays french horn for the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, and David is essentially a professional nerd, making YouTube videos, doing podcasts, and writing critical blog posts about things of nerdy-geeky interest. Jared has tried to watch some of the videos, but the podcasts are much easier to listen to. He'd never say so, but the podcasts make great background noise – he can listen with one ear and do a bunch of other things at the same time. He doesn't have to really pay attention.

Jared notes that Mars the Wonder Mutt, David's dog, has discovered Sadie's arrival by the simple fact of her starting to chase him around the dog run. Disraeli and Chamberlain, Mark's spoiled pugs, are lying on the ground in front of the bench, snuffling and snorting and looking very content.

"Moose!" David calls in greeting. The pugs perk up. Mark waves. Jared spares Sadie and the Wonder Mutt a glance, but they're still playing and not fighting yet, so he nudges David so he can sit at the end of the bench. "The next podcast is about Iain Banks. You should listen."

"I'll check it out," Jared says. One of the pugs heaves herself to her feet and waddles over to Jared so he can scratch her head. They look so much alike he can only tell them apart by their collars. He has no idea why Mark's pugs have recognizably-male names if they're both female, but he's never asked. Mark himself is looking through a sheaf of sheet music and Jared leans around David just enough to try and get a better look at it.

"New score," Mark says, noticing Jared's nosiness.

"He's very bad company," David adds, pretending to be annoyed. Mark rolls his eyes. "Not at all interested in my Minecraft woes."

"Your kid's better at it than you are, isn't he," Jared comments. It's not really a question. David slaps his hand over his heart in mock offense.

"You wound me!"

"He won't shut up about it," Mark says, his eyes back on his sheet music.

"What are you doing next?" Jared asks him, and Mark holds up the music so Jared can see the cover. *Tannhauser*. That means nothing to Jared, whose knowledge of opera starts and ends with "fat ladies in horned helmets, plus Pavarotti", because everyone knows who Luciano Pavarotti is. There are little stickers on the sheet music, gold stars and musical notes and a little snail. "Why is it covered with stickers?"

Mark flips the sheet music around so he can see the cover. "My son did that. He thinks sheet music is boring."

"It is," David whispers to Jared.

"I heard that."

"How's the book business?"

"Good," Jared says. "Busy. If you're going to talk about authors in your podcast, you could give us a shout-out."

"I could do that."

"We could work out a discount – 'Mention that you heard about us in David's geeky podcast and get 10% off.'" He considers. "Are there nerdy numbers besides forty-two? Because I can't give people that kind of discount."

"You know the podcast is worldwide, don't you?" Mark says. Jared hadn't thought he was listening, and doesn't bother to answer. The Moose and Mayhem will ship pretty much anywhere, anyway.

"I'll use a secret code," David says, rubbing his hands together as he thinks. "Something only my nerds would know to say to you."

"If you call my store a wretched hive of scum and villainy I'm not giving anyone a discount."

"I would never."

"You would," Mark says. "He keeps asking me how things are in Mos Eisley," he tells Jared. "And then I tell him that Greedo shot first." He grins.

"And then someone has to separate us," David adds, grinning as well. "We confuse the dogs."

Chamberlain makes her opinion of this whole conversation clear by sitting on David's feet. Mark chuckles.

"Can I ask you guys something?" Jared says. Mark puts down his sheet music and both he and David look at Jared expectantly. "If there's someone you think you're interested in, but you don't know if they're interested in you – but you think they are – how do you find out?"

"I kissed Jane," David answers. "I knew she liked me because she didn't slap me."

"You could ask the person," Mark suggests. "If that's too forward, you could ask one of their friends."

"Are you hot for one of your customers?"

"No," Jared says. "Well, not really. I mean, he's bought some stuff, but he's not a regular. He owns the bar where my friend's girlfriend works. He comes by sometimes late at night, after the bar closes. I don't know where he lives."

"Where's the bar?" Mark asks.

"Red Hook."

"Isn't that in Brooklyn?" David asks. He tries to nudge Chamberlain off his foot, but she doesn't move.

"He comes all the way out here after work," Mark continues, "which is, what, three in the morning? Four? He could go home and sleep, and you're not sure he's interested in you?"

"Yeah."

Mark raises an eyebrow.

"Have you been to his bar?" David asks.

"Once, but that was before we knew each other. I haven't really had time to go back. By the time they're open, I should be working. Besides, it's in Brooklyn. The one time I went, there were four of us and we took a cab."

"Bars are open by five," Mark says. "You should go. Get a soda. Say hello."

"Ask your friend to ask his girlfriend," David says.

"Her girlfriend," Jared corrects him. "I guess I could." Although to be honest, he's not sure he wants to involve the whole store in his potential love life. He's sure Genevieve knows that Jensen's been showing up at the store to chat, just because he's sure her girlfriend Danneel knows, but it seems a little too high school to ask Genevieve to ask Danneel to ask Jensen how he feels about Jared. He's an adult, he should be able to figure this out by himself.

He knew that Milo, his ex, was interested in him because Milo asked him out. But Jensen only comes to the bookstore in the wee hours and talks to him, and occasionally emails him something funny or tells him about what's going on at the bar. And that could be Jensen expressing a romantic interest, or it could be Jensen expressing a friendship interest. Jared's gaydar has never been particularly sensitive, and he's not used to waiting this long for someone to either put the moves on him or make it explicitly clear that they want him to do it.

He's pretty sure he's interested in Jensen, though. They need to hang out somewhere that isn't The Moose and Mayhem in the middle of the night, so he can know. Or he can do what David did to the woman who's now his wife, and kiss Jensen and hope he doesn't get slapped.

"Thanks," he says. "I guess."

"Are you going to kiss him?" David asks hopefully.

"Not yet. I don't want to freak him out."

Mark makes a noncommittal noise.

"You think he's into me?" Jared asks him.

"I think he's doing a good impression of it, if he's not," Mark answers.

"I'm bad at this," Jared admits. "Usually if a guy's going to hit on me, he doesn't wait a couple of months."

"Why aren't you doing the hitting?" David asks, then shakes his head at himself. "That doesn't sound right."

"I know what you mean. I don't know."

"Maybe you should try that."

"Maybe." Sadie seems to have tired Mars out, because he ambles over and plops down on the ground in front of the guys. Mark's pugs snort at him. He looks put-upon.

"I should take the Wonder Mutt home," David says, leaning over to put Mars' leash on and then standing up, finally dislodging Chamberlain off his feet. "You should kiss this guy."

"Thanks for the advice," Jared says dryly. "What if he's not into me and I scare him off?"

"You won't. Come on, mutt, we got pods to cast." Mars heaves himself up, and he and David head out of the dog run.

"He's going way out of his way to see you," Mark reminds Jared. "He sounds like he's interested. Are you?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

"I don't know if I have time for a boyfriend. I don't even have time to go by his bar and say hello."

"If I have time to spend on the lady in my life? You do too. Don't think about it for too long." Mark folds up his sheet music and stands and stretches. "Work calls." He nudges his pugs to their feet, clips their leashes on, and leads them away. And Jared sits on the bench and wishes he remembered to bring a ball to throw for Sadie. She's exploring the dog run and the two remaining dogs – an exceptionally shaggy Samoyed and a greyhound in a pink coat – and he wants her to get more exercise before they go

back to the store. He finds a stick and throws that to her for a little bit, thinking about Jensen and The Moose and Mayhem and when he might find time to make the trip out to Jensen's bar.

He continues to think about how he might find out if Jensen would be receptive to him until he and Sadie return to the bookstore, at which point he realizes he should be thinking about work. He props the door open because it's nice outside, and he wants to encourage people to come in. Through the open door he can hear the unmistakable voice of a mother at the end of her rope - "Philippe!" - which is followed thirty seconds later by a small boy wearing an unzipped Captain America hoodie who runs giggling into the store and vanishes in the back. He's trailed by a pretty but also pretty harried-looking woman who must be his mother, judging by her half-apologetic, half-pleading face. Jared points to the back of the store and she disappears as well. Sadie follows them, clearly interested. Two minutes later they're all back, with Philippe – still giggling – slung over his mom's shoulder.

"Thank you," she tells Jared as she heads out the door. He grabs for Sadie, who tries to follow. "I'm just going to turn you loose in the dog park," she tells her kid, and then they're outside the store and off down the sidewalk and out of hearing. Jared imagines one energetic small child trying to engage Mark's lazy pugs, and smiles to himself. Mars the Wonder Mutt would probably be better company.

The dog theme continues not half an hour later, when an elderly gentleman in a brown leather jacket and a flat cap comes in, sees Sadie, and bends down to pet her.

"Are you the Moose or Mayhem?" he asks.

"I'm the Moose," Jared says. "She's Sadie."

"How old is she?"

"Eight? I'm not really sure. She's a rescue and they didn't know how old she was."

They chat about dogs in general and Sadie in particular for a few minutes, until the phone rings and Jared has to answer it, freeing the elderly gentleman to wander over to the history section. He's eventually joined by an older woman in a red coat who must be his wife, and they leave with a travel book on Prague and a history called *More Powerful Than Dynamite*, which Jared has actually read and can recommend from experience. Both of them stop to pet Sadie on the way out the door, much to her delight.

The rest of the day passes as they normally do – customers to help and orders to take care of and employees' hours to verify and shelves to straighten and a book signing to arrange and invoices to pay. He and Chad should probably sit down and have a conversation about money. He eats dinner and walks Sadie before taking her up to the apartment, and then it's late at night and all that's left is to run a broom around the store because for some reason people were tracking in crap on their shoes all day.

Charles the jazz musician drops by a little before four, as he does at least once a week. He keeps a nocturnal schedule, and he reads a lot. Every so often he'll bring in a bunch of used books to sell for store credit, just to clear off his shelves for new ones. He takes good care of his books and Jared is happy to buy them.

"I'm playing a gig in Astoria next week," he tells Jared, after paying for a Robert Jackson Bennett

paperback. "Can I leave a flyer?"

"Sure," Jared says. There's a noticeboard by the counter, where people can post flyers for various events and things of general neighborhood interest. Jared pins Charles' flyer over an old notice for yoga classes. He can't go to the show, but AJ lives in Astoria and might be interested.

Not long after Charles leaves, another couple of guys come in – one with brown hair and a green jacket, and his friend, who's shorter and blond and practically drowning in a Cooper Union hoodie.

"Did you really drag me across the river to a bookstore?" the blond guy asks, as they come to a stop by the table set up with this month's suggested reading.

"Yes," his friend says.

"Why?"

"Because bookstores are really soothing to me. And I thought you'd be too cold on the ferry."

The blond guy shrugs, says "I have a hood," and wanders off towards the art and architecture books. His friend follows before Jared has a chance to offer to help them find something.

They don't buy anything, and aside from a very strange phone call that turns out to be a very wrong number, the store is dead until Anton shows up at five and Jared can go upstairs and to bed.

The next night sees a few college students coming in twos and threes, a high schooler in a t-shirt and pajama bottoms who admits she had to sneak out of her parents' apartment but she just finished *Code Name: Verity* and needs the next book, a pair of girls who seem to be on a date, and a punk guy in the requisite black stovepipe jeans and Doc Martens and a jean jacket covered with studs and patches and paint. There's a blue star tattooed on the back of his hand, which Jared notices when the guy pulls off his glove so he can count his money. He buys two art books – Robert Mapplethorpe Polaroids (used) and 1940s pin-up girls (new) – and much to Jared's surprise, he pays in cash.

The Sams come in not long after the punk with the art books leaves. Blonde Sam explains that they've been sent on a coffee-and-snack run because it's very quiet at the hospital, to which Brunette Sam makes the sign of the cross with her index fingers and hisses "You said the Q word! Never say the Q word!"

"Quiet?" Jared asks.

"Shh!"

"Sorry," Blonde Sam apologizes sheepishly. "Things are calm. We're taking a break." She glances around the store. "This place looks so clean!"

"I swept," Jared says.

"Do you do houses?" Brunette Sam asks.

"Just mine."

Blonde Sam goes off to look at the craft books, and Jared asks Brunette Sam "How do you know if a guy is interested in you?"

"Usually he asks me out," she says. "Why? Do you need a date?" She grins.

"There's a guy who comes in sometimes really late at night, and I think I'm interested in him, and I think he's interested in me, but he hasn't done anything, so I'm not sure. One of my friends says I should kiss him if I really want to know, but I don't want to wig him out. He works in Brooklyn. I'm really out of his way. But he hasn't made a move yet."

"Is he even gay?"

Jared tries to remember if Jensen has ever said anything about an ex, or if Genevieve has ever said anything about him, and he's pretty sure that... yeah, Jensen did mention an ex-boyfriend once, when they were talking about working nights and how hard it was sometimes to see your friends who had 9-5 jobs. "Yeah, he is, he told me about his ex-boyfriend."

"Maybe you should try asking him out."

"I don't know if I have time for a boyfriend. Or if he does."

"Then why are you thinking about him? And if he doesn't have time, why does he keep coming to see you?"

Blonde Sam comes back to the front of the bookstore and Brunette Sam asks her how she knows when someone is interested in her.

"If they ask me on a date, that's usually a pretty big clue," she says, then holds up her left hand and waggles her fingers so Jared and the other Sam can see her wedding ring. "But they usually don't."

"Jared wants to ask a boy out," Brunette Sam explains, "but can't tell how it would be received. I suggested he do the asking."

Both Sams look at Jared expectantly.

"What?" he says. "You both think I should ask him out? What if he says no?"

"What are the chances?" Brunette Sam asks.

"He hasn't made a move yet. If he's so interested in me, why hasn't he done anything about it?"

"This guy comes from Brooklyn to see Jared," Brunette Sam explains to Blonde Sam. "That's his move," she tells Jared. "Now it's your turn."

Jared remembers what Mark said, that Jensen is making a point to come out of his way late at night when he's tired and no doubt wants to go home. As someone who really enjoys his sleep, as little of it as he gets, Jared can see how putting off one's warm bed to chat with someone might indicate the opening

move towards a future relationship. So Brunette Sam is right, and it's Jared's turn to do something.

He just has to find a time and place, and figure out what exactly his move is going to be.

He shares this with the Sams, who seem satisfied, and he tells them to wave hello to all the newborns for him when they get back to the hospital.

Two afternoons later he sucks up his courage, leaves Sadie with Kim at the store, and takes Mark's advice to go to Two Brothers Bar to visit Jensen in his place of work for once. Jensen did tell him to come by, after all.

"Jared!" Danneel calls from behind the bar. "What are you doing here?"

"Is, uh, is Jensen here?" he asks.

"No. It's his day off." She smiles brightly. "Gen owes me ten bucks."

"Why?"

"I bet her you'd have to ask Jensen out first." Danneel looks unreasonably pleased with herself. Jared doesn't mind that Genevieve is discussing his lack of love life with her girlfriend.

"I didn't come to ask him anything."

"Uh-huh. You want a drink while you're here? The kitchen's not done yet, but the bar's open." She waves in the general direction of the end of the bar, where if Jared looks around the counter he can see a hole in the wall covered by two thick plastic sheets.

"No, I'm gonna go back to the store."

"Soda?" Jared shakes his head and she shrugs. "Do you want me to tell him you were here?"

"No. Wait. Yeah. Tell him I came to say hi."

"Just hi?"

"Just hi."

"That's boring. When the kitchen's done you'll have to come back and have dinner. Chris is so proud of his menu." She rolls her eyes in a way that makes Jared think she's tired of hearing about it. "If you're awake before two, you can come for brunch."

"I might. I should go. Tell Gen I said hi."

Well, that was a bust, he thinks as he waits for the bus back to the subway station. But at least he tried. And he can always come back. And Danneel will tell Jensen he came by, which is almost as good as Jensen actually being here to see him.



The bar is driving Jensen nuts. There's the kitchen renovation, which is taking longer than expected thanks to the building's idiosyncratic plumbing and some DIY electrical work that the next-door tenants did about ten years ago. There are the various incarnations of the menu, which Chris revises every few days or so, plus his attempts to make everything himself to try it out on the bar's unwitting staff and customers. "Why have a captive audience," he says, "if you're not going to take advantage of it?" They haven't found a cook yet, although not for lack of trying, and no one is sure about what other staff they might need to hire. Danneel thinks they're going to need at least one dedicated server, but Jensen and Chris both suspect that she just doesn't want to have to do it on top of her normal bartender duties.

At least they've been able to buy a lot of equipment off Eric, who as it turns out isn't closing Audrey's so much as merging it with an existing bakery that one of his friends owns in Queens. The bar already has a supplier for things like glassware and dishes and paper goods, although Chris and Jensen are still looking for a reasonable supplier for fresh produce and meat and dairy. They want to buy as local as possible and they don't want to cut corners, but they don't have a big budget.

As if that wasn't enough to think about, suddenly Two Brothers is crammed with people on line-dance nights, so much so that Jensen and Chris have made it once a week, rather than twice a month. It was always something they offered as kind of a joke and a nostalgic throwback to bars Chris remembered from his youth – and because it fit the bar's general honky-tonk, country-western ambience, and it was fun – but even though they got enough of a crowd to make it worthwhile, line-dancing was never the bar's biggest draw.

Now all of a sudden people are showing up every week to line up and kick their heels around the tiny dance floor in front of the stage. Jensen knows he shouldn't complain, because business is business and folks who come for the dancing pay good money for their drinks, but he doesn't understand it at all. He keeps up with industry trends, and he hasn't read or seen or heard anything about a resurgence in interest for country-bar line-dancing in New York.

"Ironic hipsters," Tom mutters one night, his voice low enough that no one on the other side of the bar can hear him, but Jensen can.

"Ironic hipsters with money," Jensen adds. "How's the tap?" It wasn't working right last night, and Chris and Jensen spent most of the morning and half the afternoon trying to figure out what was wrong. The last thing they need is for one of the taps to give out.

"So far so good." Tom pulls on it, gets half a glass of foam, dumps it, and tries again. This time it works. Jensen glances up and notes the crowd of people pressed against the counter, either chatting with each other or trying to get his attention. At least he and Tom haven't had to break up any fights. If nothing else, this new crowd seems pretty well-behaved.

He can hear the music over the crowd, and Chris' friend Steve calling out what sound suspiciously like

square-dance steps. He chuckles to himself. *Way to confuse the hipsters, Steve.*

Tom scoots down the bar to deliver his beers and Jensen takes his place at the taps. He pours three pints, a Pappy Van Winkle on the rocks, and a Coke with three cherries, and leans over the counter to better hear the next order, only to discover Felicia from the Ginger Girls' Club yelling "Where did all these people come from??" near his face.

"It's not your night," he yells back, which is a stupid response but the only thing he can think of.

"Julie wanted to line-dance. I told her it was never this crowded!"

"Surprise! What can I get you?"

"Red Stripe, Red Stripe, Hendricks martini! Shaken, like Bond. I know it's not red, you don't have to tell me." Jensen leans away from the bar enough to see her grin.

"Soon we'll have a kitchen," he says, "and you can get red meat and red potatoes and probably red velvet cake," and then he goes off to get her beers and to make the martini.

For the first few months after Two Brothers opened, people would order martinis and be surprised as hell when they were served classic martinis, made with gin and vermouth and garnished with a stuffed olive. Jensen and Chris both resent the way "martini" turned into shorthand for "vodka cocktail in a martini glass", and eventually had to put it on the little drinks menus and the web site that if you order a martini, no qualifier, you're going to get gin and vermouth, and if you want it made with vodka, you need to say so.

Fortunately for Chris and Jensen – although maybe not so much for people who like vodka cocktails served in martini glasses – the fad seems to be fading, giving over to a new trend towards dark-liquor drinks. And if you want a craft cocktail made with bourbon or whiskey or rye, Two Brothers is your place.

Danneel squeezes behind Jensen as he's shaking Felicia's martini, her hands full of dirty glasses. "You can't even breathe on the floor," she says. "I can't get over this. Where did these people come from? They're not even all good tippers."

"Tom told Mike, Mike told everyone?" Jensen suggests. Tom's roommate seems to know fully half the residents of the five boroughs, plus huge chunks of western Long Island, all of Westchester County, and north New Jersey.

Danneel shrugs and keeps moving. As she edges behind Tom, Jensen can see her pause to ask him something. Tom shakes his head and Danneel goes on to the kitchen.

It's a crowded but good night, business-wise, even if no one has the energy to clean up after the bar closes. Steve complains that someone kept making requests - "It would've been okay if they were asking for bands I'd ever heard of," he grumps – and Danneel bitches that she had her ass slapped three times.

"Why didn't you say something?" Jensen demands. One of the house rules is that you don't touch the bartenders. The house rules are hanging on the wall and written on the chalkboard behind the bar, so

there's no excuse for not having seen them.

"I grabbed the last guy's hand and yelled 'Did anyone lose a hand? Because I found this one on my ass,'" she explains. "He was suitably embarrassed."

"Well, if it happens again, tell me or Chris and we'll have a word."

"I would've smacked him for you," Tom adds. "Alona would have too, if she was here."

"I can smack my own rude customers, thank you," Danneel says. "It's just been so long since someone played grab-ass that I was surprised. The first time I was trying to get past the line-dancers and I thought it was an accident."

"Could've been," Steve comments. "There were a lot of uncoordinated people out there."

"A lot of drunk uncoordinated people."

"Good for business," Jensen reminds them. "At least there's that."

They wipe down the tables and the bar counter and put away the cocktail garnishes and pick up the rest of the dirty glasses and turn over the chairs on top of the tables and sweep the floor and wipe off the booths. Jensen divides up the tips.

"Tell Chris he needs to run the music next time," Steve says to Jensen as he heads for his car. "He's got more patience. Although I gotta say, getting to call square dance changes was fun."

"You didn't scare everyone away," Jensen says. "That's something. Drive safe."

"See you later."

Jensen seriously considers going out to The Moose and Mayhem to see Jared, mostly because Jared dropped by the bar a couple of days ago when he wasn't there, but he's so tired he can't think. The apartment is dark and Chris is fast asleep by the time Jensen gets home, which isn't surprising, and the kitchen is full of dirty dishes, which is. There's a Post-It stuck to the door of Jensen's bedroom, telling him the darkroom out in Queens is booked tomorrow. This is frustrating, because he was looking forward to some private time with 35mm film negatives and paper and chemicals and no people.

As he's falling asleep he has an idea what he can do with his day instead. He'll call Jared. They should spend time together that isn't just late at night at Jared's bookstore. He knows they're both busy, but he's ready to commit to someone again, and from what Danneel has told him – and from what her girlfriend has told her – he's pretty sure Jared's ready too. One of them just has to make the first move, and it may as well be Jensen.

Sort of.

"Are you asking me out?" Jared says, when Jensen calls The Moose and Mayhem and asks for him. He and Chris are sitting in the bar about to have a meeting, and Chris insisted Jensen get this out of the way first. Jensen is pretty sure Chris just wants to be able to eavesdrop on the conversation.

"I guess so," Jensen says. "I know you'll have to get back to your store, and I have a lot of stuff to do – I should be doing some of it now, actually – but I thought if you had a couple of free hours...."

"I can make some time. Should I meet you at the bar?"

"Do you want to see the construction?"

"Yeah."

"Really? If Chris is around he'll give you a tour and talk your ear off about his food plans."

"That's okay. I like to eat."

Jensen can almost hear Jared's grin through the phone. "All righty, then. Two Brothers, five o'clock. See you then."

After he hangs up he notices Chris looking at him sideways. "What? You told me to call him now."

"Chris will talk your ear off about his food plans?" Chris repeats, one eyebrow raised.

"You know you will."

"Yeah, I probably will. We should be ready in a week. Tomorrow we've got another couple interviews for cooks, the electrician's gonna be done by the end of today, and the new grill's coming Tuesday. The menu's ready."

"Finally," Jensen interrupts, grinning, but Chris ignores him.

"And I know why the entirety of Brooklyn is showing up for line-dance nights."

"Yeah? Danneel thinks it's Mike's fault."

Chris fiddles with the laptop sitting on the table in front of him and then turns it so Jensen can see the web site on the screen. He pulls the laptop closer. It's a blog post for a Brooklyn-locals web site, talking about fun and unusual things to do in the various neighborhoods, and right there, the first mention, is "Line-dance nights at Two Brothers".

So Tom was right. It is hipsters, no doubt all of them dancing ironically to Steve's country-western and square dance calls.

"Someone retweeted it," Chris goes on, "and by now a couple thousand people have seen it. It shouldn't have taken us this long to figure it out. I thought we were pretty clued-in to neighborhood news."

Jensen starts clicking around the site to see what other kinds of things it covers. "This looks new. We probably just didn't see it." He sees a post about brunch places and makes a mental note to look at it later when he has more time. "I wonder how long it's going to last."

"I just hope all these people bring their friends on other nights."

"It might be time to hold another tasting and take advantage of them." Tastings were Jensen's idea – bar patrons pay a flat fee to taste a careful selection from the very long liquor menu, with free snacks to cleanse the palate. "You're not thinking we need to expand more, are you?"

"Now that we got a kitchen? Nah, that should be enough."

Two Brothers' new kitchen now takes up a little over half the space that Audrey's used to occupy, with a cozy booth and a few tables and chairs occupying the front half of the floor. Jensen and Chris had the wall knocked down between the existing bar and the new sitting area, which meant they had to close for a couple of days, but now that it's opened up, they've seen a slight increase in customers. The fact that the slight increase seems to be due to people thinking the kitchen is already open is occasionally annoying to the bartenders but a sign to Chris that introducing a real menu of real food was a good idea.

"Let me see the menu again," Jensen says, so Chris pulls the laptop back to face him and brings up the mock-up so Jensen can see. The menu designer and printer is a friend of a friend of one of the guys who shares Jensen's photography studio. She gave the bar a bit of a discount in exchange for a "Designed and printed by" credit at the bottom of each menu.

"You need to be here for the interviews tomorrow," Chris says. "Whatever you end up doing with your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend. Not yet."

Chris chuckles. "Bring him to line-dance nights. If that doesn't scare him off, he's a keeper."

"You heard me – he's coming by today. If meeting you doesn't scare him off, he's a keeper." He grins. Chris rolls his eyes.

"It's good to know you're finally over Matt."

"I was over Matt months ago."

"Which is why it took you this long to start dating again."

"It took me this long to start dating again because I wanted to find someone who won't break up with me because I can't have breakfast with him at six every morning, and who doesn't need to have dinner with me every night."

Matt was a good boyfriend in some ways – he was a romantic and he was considerate and he was ready to talk it out when either one of them was upset or unhappy or plain pissed off, and he was in general a kind and decent human being – but he wanted someone who kept the same hours he did and had weekends free so they could do things together. Being so invested in the bar meant Jensen could never commit to that. The break-up was mutual and while they haven't gone out of their way to stay in touch, they parted on fairly good terms, and Jensen hasn't really missed Matt in a long time.

"Enough about my love life," Jensen says. "Remind me when our prospective cooks are coming

tomorrow."

They look in on the electrician, who really does seem to be nearly finished. They make another pass through the kitchen, run through their excessively detailed checklist to make sure they haven't missed anything, and field an emergency phone call from the produce supplier. Chris goes to the Fairway for a bag of limes and some ginger. Jensen takes a nap on the old couch in the bar's cluttered office.

And Jared shows up a little after five, as promised. He explains that he took the subway and then a bus and he was worried he was going to be late, but here he is.

"I wasn't going anywhere," Jensen says. "Chris left, though. He had to meet one of the guys from his band. Do you still want to see the kitchen? I can give you the grand tour."

"I'd like that." Jared grins.

God damn, he's cute, Jensen thinks.

Jared gets the full tour of Two Brothers, including a peek into the office ("Just so you can see what a mess it is," Jensen explains, "because Chris won't shift his ass to help me straighten it up") and behind the bar, and as much detail about the kitchen and the menu as Jensen can offer. Jensen tells him about the beers and the bourbon and the tiny distilleries that are opening up in Brooklyn. He talks about some of the bands they've booked and that line-dance nights are packed to the rafters and occur more frequently now that hipsters have discovered the place. He points out the small dance floor, indicating how little it takes to crowd it. He skims over the issues he and Chris have had with the construction and the new suppliers, and he doesn't mention that they should be debuting the new full menu in a week but they still don't have anyone to actually run the kitchen.

They end up sitting at the bar, or rather Jared ends up sitting at the bar and Jensen ends up standing behind it.

"Try this," Jensen says, pulling down a bottle and pouring a quarter-inch of scotch into a glass. He pushes it across the counter and Jared takes a sip. "Chris and I call that 'Pillow Talk scotch'."

"Why?"

"The story is that the founders came up with the idea to open a distillery one morning as they were lying in bed. As far as we know, it's the only distillery that exists because of pillow talk."

"Huh." Jared finishes it. "I'm not a scotch drinker but it's, um, it's interesting."

"That's a good word for it. It has its fans but it's a little too peaty for me." Next is a splash of bourbon in a clean glass. "Now try this one. Gangsters' Hill. It's new."

Jared drinks it slowly. Jensen tries not to stare at his mouth and throat.

"I like this better," he says. Then, as Jensen reaches for yet another bottle, "I have to go back to the store eventually. I can't show up sloshed on free liquor."

"If I wanted to get you sloshed I'd be mixing you real drinks. You haven't even had a full shot. Just try one more. It's called Widow Jane. It's local. I'll drink it with you." Jensen pours a little whiskey for both of them. They clink glasses. "To Brooklyn distillers, long may they distill."

Jared hides his giggle in his glass. Jensen grins.

"I want to show you something," he says, after they both finish their whiskey. "Let me put these away and we'll go." He takes the dirty glasses into the current tiny kitchen, and when he comes back he finds Jared peering at the chalkboard behind the bar. "Are you reading the house rules?"

"Don't touch the bartenders," Jared reads. "Everyone drinks and dances and has a good time.' Nothing about accepting free drinks from the owner."

"No point in having a rule if you're breaking it all the time. There has to be some benefit to putting up with Chris when you don't have to. Come on."

His and Chris' apartment is a bit of a walk. The sun is beginning to set and the first wave of people coming home from office jobs has started, so once they get out of the industrial areas and into more residential ones, there's a decent number of folks out and about. It's going to be a nice night, and as Jensen and Jared walk back to the apartment, they chat about the bar and the bookstore and what each of them does with his free time. In Jared's case, that doesn't seem to be much, only because he doesn't seem to have enough free time to do much in.

"That's really too bad," Jensen says. "Sometimes I feel like the bar is my entire life, and even I can make some time to take pictures and lock myself in a darkroom. You tried to convince me I could find time to read, right? So I should try to convince you to find time to do something fun."

"*This* is fun," Jared says. Jensen ducks his head, suddenly shy about how pleased he is.

They can hear music coming from the first floor apartment in Jensen and Chris' building. It sounds like opera. Jensen doesn't stop to appreciate it or to show Jared his own apartment, instead continuing up the stairs to the roof.

Someone has brought a couple of patio chairs up to the roof. Jensen and Jared ignore them in favor of leaning on the brick parapet.

The sun is falling towards New Jersey, gilding the buildings of lower Manhattan and streaking the river with silver. If they could see it, Jensen knows, the Empire State Building would be turning pink. A slight breeze kicks up. Jensen points out the Statue of Liberty and Governor's Island and the general Wall Street area, then turns to point over the tops of the buildings of Brooklyn in what he hopes is the direction of Queens.

"My studio's that way," he says. "Since we were talking about fun things."

"And I live that way," Jared says, waving in a northerly direction, past the skyscrapers of southern Manhattan. "I think."

"If you look there," Jensen says, pointing again, "those blinking lights, that's a gantry crane at the

container terminal. Sometimes I'll come up here at night and watch them, and it's like they're blinking just for me. New York's a big city, you know? When I first moved up here, I didn't know anyone besides Chris, and it seemed like a very cold and unfriendly place. I still think it is, sometimes. I had to find something that spoke to me, that made me feel less alone. I'm lucky I had Chris, because you need someone to care about, who cares about you. It's the only way you'll ever survive this place." If he hadn't already known Chris, he never would have stayed here. But Jared came to New York not knowing anyone. Jensen looks at him, a little affectionate smile on his lips. "But that's not a problem for you, is it."

Jared grins. "No."

"You'll always find someone, and you'll always get someone to find you."

"I think I did."

Jared leans in and presses his lips to Jensen's. He pauses for a second, just long enough for Jensen to wonder if that's all the kiss is going to be, but then his tongue pushes almost tentatively between Jensen's lips, Jensen's mouth opens for him, and the kiss continues.

Jared's lips are dry, but after his initial hesitation, his mouth is sure. For a first kiss, it's a good one, the two of them standing on the roof of Jensen's building, the little lights on the container terminal gantry blinking behind them, the faintest hum from the traffic and the life of the city audible below them. Jensen's hand comes up to cup Jared's face, and Jared's hand closes around the back of his head.

The roof can be a romantic spot, which is one of the reasons Jensen brought Jared up here, and if Jared hadn't made a move, Jensen was going to.

He pulls away reluctantly, but he has to breathe. Jared smiles at him, a small, pleased smile. Jensen licks his lips, trying to hang on to the taste of Jared's mouth. He senses the sharp smokiness from the samples he poured at the bar, an added note of flavor on Jared's tongue.

"I had to do that," Jared says.

"I'm glad you did."

"Can I do it again?"

"Why are you asking me?"

Jensen doesn't wait for an answer. He pulls Jared forward and kisses him again.

It's a much deeper kiss this time, more intense. Jared lets Jensen control it, varying the insistence of his tongue and the heat in his breath and the quick nips of his teeth. Jensen has one hand buried in Jared's hair and one hand clenched in the front of his jacket. Jared takes Jensen's face in both hands. His palms are warm against Jensen's cheeks and for all the intensity of their kiss, his fingers rest lightly on Jensen's skin.

This time Jared pulls away first, panting slightly. "Shit," he breathes. "I should've kissed you a long

time ago, if that's how you respond."

"Maybe you should have." Jensen grins. He feels light and happy and excited and turned on. He wants to kiss Jared again, but Jared should probably head back to the store. But still, this is exactly what Jensen hoped would happen. This was his plan.

"I should go relieve Genevieve," Jared says, as if reading his thoughts. "Did I tell you I couldn't stay out here that late?"

"Yeah, it's okay. I'll go back with you."

"Okay." Jared makes no attempt to move. He's watching Jensen's face. It looks like he's watching Jensen's lips. "Can I use your bathroom first?"

That's so far from what Jensen expected to hear that he laughs.

"Yeah, you can use my bathroom. I want to get my camera, anyway, and try and get some good pictures of the city at night. It's always an experiment, taking night shots."

They go back inside so Jared can pee and Jensen can pack up one of his film cameras. Jared asks him a bunch of questions about night photography on the way back to Manhattan, and Jensen is embarrassed to realize that he has completely monopolized the conversation the entire trip. Jared laughs and says he doesn't mind, it was interesting.

"Wait," Jared says, stopping at the corner down the sidewalk from the bookstore and grabbing Jensen's sleeve. His eyes flick back and forth, apparently checking to see who might be watching, and then he bends his head and brushes his lips across Jensen's mouth in a brief kiss. "Thanks for showing me the lights," he murmurs. "I'm glad you found me."

"So am I," Jensen says, unable to stop smiling. "Go inside. Let Genevieve go home."

"Yes sir." Jared grins and heads down the sidewalk and into the store. Jensen shakes his head, surprised and delighted by the turn their relationship has taken, and goes back towards the subway station and uptown.

A couple of nights later, he goes by the bookstore after he closes up the bar. Two Brothers had a busy night, which was not helped by all the people who expected the kitchen to be open, and he's exhausted. He should really just go home and to bed, but he's still thinking about Jared kissing him. He is genuinely too tired to plan his next move, so this will have to be it. Making the trip across the river takes very little effort, now that he's been doing it for a few months. Besides, Jared's always at the end of it.

"Jensen!" Jared exclaims, when he pushes the bookstore door open. Then, "You look terrible."

"I'm fucking exhausted," Jensen says, wondering even as the words are coming out of his mouth what he's really doing here. He should just call Jared tomorrow. Make an actual date. They can go out for lunch or coffee this time, like normal people. Do something fun.

"You look it. You wanna sit?" Jared gestures to the back of the store, where if Jensen leans around the

bookshelves he can just see a few chairs. "We had the smallest author talk ever this afternoon. A poet and like four local fans. Three local fans and someone who just happened to be here."

"No, I'm okay. I'll just lean on the counter." He does so. Jared grins at him. "Good day?"

"Yeah, I guess. No better or worse than normal. Just the poet. Oh, I did get this one girl who was looking for a book, but she couldn't remember the title or the author, just the cover. She's trying to tell me 'It has two men in bed on the cover, it's from a painting, does that help?' and I'm trying to tell her I need a little more information than that. I mean, if I haven't just read the same edition of the same book, I won't know it by the cover."

"You mean you don't memorize the covers of all the books you sell?" Jensen asks, grinning himself.

"I'm good, but I'm not that good. She knew what it was about, but that didn't help me either. I was thinking, two men in bed, are they talking about scotch?" He grins. "The girl finally had to call one of her friends to ask what the title was." Jared shakes his head, chuckling. "We didn't even have it. I had to order it for her."

"What's it about?"

"It's a memoir of an American guy's years living in Paris with his boyfriend. It was the end of the nineteenth century and no one in Paris cared who you slept with, so they felt a lot more comfortable there than here. The boyfriend went to Paris to paint, and the guy who wrote the book went with him intending to write, but couldn't. They came back to the US eventually. I should see if the library has it, so I can read it before it comes in."

"Sounds interesting." Two men in love in Paris? It sounds romantic. Jensen yawns. "I'm dead on my feet. I gotta go home."

"Why don't you stay here?"

"I just told you, I'm falling asleep."

"No, I mean stay over." Jared points at the ceiling. Jensen can feel his forehead wrinkling with confusion. "At my place."

"Um."

"If you want to," Jared adds hurriedly. "I mean. I want you to. Do you want to?"

He looks and sounds about ten years younger, and uncharacteristically unsure. Jensen's tempted. He's really, really tempted. He guesses this will make the two of them a couple – Jared has never seemed like the casual-relationship type, and Jensen sought him out in the first place because he was starting to think about maybe dating again. So if this ever progressed, Jensen would follow it all the way.

Although he's not going to hang out in the store until Jared can leave, and Jared isn't going to close up just to sleep with him.

"I have a spare set of keys," Jared goes on. "In the office. Just in case. Sadie's probably asleep on the bed, but you can nudge her if she's in your way. I'll be up about five."

"Um," Jensen says again.

"Is that Jensen-speak for 'Thank you, Jared, for letting me crash at your place'?"

"That's Jensen-speak for 'Thank you and I'm going to be asleep when you get in'."

"That's okay. I'll try not to wake you up."

Jensen yawns. Jared grins, digs in his pockets, and pulls out a set of keys. "The green one is the front door of the building, the orange one is the top lock, and the blue one is the bottom lock. Make yourself at home. I don't have a spare toothbrush, so if you use mine, don't tell me."

"I wasn't planning on it." That seems a little too intimate. Also, gross. Jensen takes the keys. "Is this weird?" he asks. "It seems weird."

"What, that I gave you my keys so you can sleep in my bed with my dog?" He's still grinning. Jensen resists the urge to roll his eyes. "Or that this is the first time you're going to see my apartment? Or that we've only kissed twice?"

"All of the above."

"Come here." Jared beckons with the hand holding the keys, then leans over the counter, pulls Jensen's face towards him, and kisses him. It's not a very long kiss, but there's some tongue and a little nibble at the end. Jared releases Jensen and leans back. He looks pleased with himself. "There. That's three." He hands over the keys. "Now go get some sleep."

Jensen licks his lips. "Yes, Mom."

He goes outside to let himself into Jared's building, and then up the stairs to the apartment. Sadie comes running, and he'd swear she looks disappointed when she sees it's him. She licks his hand anyway when he bends down to pet her.

"Don't worry," he tells her, "Jared's coming home eventually. He just sent me up so I don't have to go home."

In fact, Jared probably sent him upstairs so they can have sex later, but it's strange to say that to the dog. Jensen is a little embarrassed that he's just now realizing it, but to be fair he really is very tired, and things that should be obvious, aren't.

Part of him really wants to look closer at Jared's apartment, because he's here by himself and he's curious, but most of him really just wants to get ready for bed and go to sleep. Sadie follows him through the kitchen and tiny living room, past dark wood bookshelves to the bedroom, where he kicks off his shoes and peels off his socks and jacket – and then doesn't know where to put them – and from there to the bathroom. He can't bring himself to use Jared's toothbrush, but there's a bottle of Listerine he can use instead.

He's not at all surprised to find that Jared's toothbrush glass is a commemorative Dallas Cowboys glass with the familiar blue and gray helmet wrapped around it, and, back in the bedroom, there's a postcard of the Alamo stuck to the mirror over the dresser. There is also unsurprisingly a small stack of books on the nightstand.

Sadie has already gotten comfortable on the bed, but has also considerably left Jensen enough room. He notes the white Christmas lights draped across the headboard as he climbs under the covers, fluffs a pillow, closes his eyes, and falls asleep instantly.

He wakes up when Jared comes home, but only because Sadie kicks him on her way off the bed. He makes an effort to stay awake long enough for Jared to brush his teeth, change into pajamas, and get under the covers.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" Jared asks.

"Sadie did," Jensen says. He yawns. "I went right to sleep when I got here. Your bed's really comfortable."

"I know." Jared scoots close enough to kiss him, a light goodnight kiss, and then grabs Jensen's wrist and rolls over, pulling Jensen's arm across his chest in the process and wriggling back against him so they're spooned together. Jensen is used to being the big spoon, and it feels right to lie this close to Jared, in Jared's bed, in Jared's apartment, with Jared's dog trying to find a place to lie down somewhere around their legs.

Jared smells weirdly like the bookstore, like paper and indoor air laid over warm human skin, and once again Jensen falls asleep almost immediately.

He wakes first, unsurprisingly, to discover Jared snoring faintly and Sadie occupying a corner of the bed. He's half hard, which also surprises him not at all, but Jared is fast asleep and Jensen doesn't want to wake him yet. He disentangles himself, rolls off the bed, and goes into the bathroom. He needs coffee and it would be nice of him to walk Sadie, wouldn't it, especially since she's awake now and following him around, and afterwards he'll make Jared breakfast, as a thank-you for letting him sleep here.

He realizes as he's hooking Sadie's leash to her collar that the thank-you will probably involve a lot fewer clothes and a lot more orgasms than pancakes would. He's okay with that.

Sadie is only interested in peeing near a utility pole and not really walking anywhere. Jensen feeds her and fills her water bowl back in the apartment, and then makes sure the bedroom door is closed so he can make breakfast without waking his host. He can't find a pancake griddle, but a frying pan works just as well. Soon Jensen has a stack of pancakes and a bottle of syrup and some butter in a butter dish, plus two cups of coffee and two glasses of orange juice. He piles everything on a tray and brings it into the bedroom.

He nudges the door open with his foot and encourages Sadie to jump on the bed and wake Jared up.

"I'm up, I'm up," Jared mumbles, pushing at her and rolling over. His arm flops onto the empty side of the mattress, pats it, and then pushes him up. "Jensen? Where'd you – oh. Hi. Good morning. Why are

you dressed?"

"Because I slept in my clothes?" Jensen says. "I walked Sadie and made us breakfast."

"You did?"

"I did." He walks all the way into the room with the tray and sets it on the bed across Jared's knees.

"Pancakes, coffee, orange juice. I remembered you like your coffee black."

"You're a treasure," Jared murmurs, taking one of the coffee cups and drinking about half of it in one go.

"I'm starving."

Jensen sits next to him and they demolish the breakfast. Jared thanks him for walking Sadie, then adds that he has to check on the store later, but maybe he'll take her and Jensen to the dog run first.

"Well, first I'm going to kiss you," Jared admits, "and then I'm going to take your clothes off, and we'll go to the dog run after that." When Jensen doesn't immediately say anything, because what do you say to that, Jared adds "I mean, if you want to. I want you to want to. Shit. This isn't going the way I planned."

"I think it's going fine," Jensen says. He gets off the bed and takes the tray into the kitchen, and by the time he comes back into the bedroom, Jared has stripped naked, rearranged himself and the blankets, and put on what Jensen can only assume is his most seductive expression.

Jensen laughs, and then instantly feels bad.

"Sorry," he says, "but your face."

Jared grins. "I guess seductive isn't my best look, huh?" He pats the bed next to him. Jensen is briefly distracted by a glimpse of the tattoo on the inside Jared's forearm – an outline of Texas with a little star where Jensen thinks San Antonio would be on a map. But now is not the time to mention it. "Come here," Jared says. "I want to thank you for making me breakfast, and I bet you want to thank me for not making you go all the way home at a really stupid hour."

Jensen steps out of his jeans on his way across the room. He notes in passing that there's now a bottle of lube and a couple of foil packets on the nightstand, and is grateful to Jared for being so prepared.

He climbs under the covers. Jared slides down to meet him, touches his cheek, and kisses him. Jared's mouth tastes like pancakes and syrup and coffee, his hand is warm on Jensen's face, and his tongue is insistent. Soon Jared is pulling at Jensen's t-shirt and trying to get close to his skin, their mouths locked together and their hands roaming up and down and across each other's bodies.

"You're sure this is okay?" Jared asks, breathlessly, pulling his head away to look Jensen in the eye. Jensen can't believe that's even a question.

"Shut up and kiss me some more," he says, grabbing Jared's face and claiming his mouth again. He hadn't quite realized he wanted Jared this badly, until Jared invited him into bed and kissed him.

He yanks at Jared's pajama bottoms and Jared yanks at his boxer briefs. Jared rolls on top of him, kissing him so hungrily Jensen thinks he might stop breathing. He's not sure how Jared grabs hold of the lube without letting go, but Jared does, and Jensen really almost does stop breathing when Jared manages to slide two slick fingers into his ass at the same time his mouth moves away from Jensen's to suck on his jaw and then his throat.

Jensen moans and pushes against Jared's hand. He's hard as hell and so desperate now that he can't even believe his own desire.

"Okay, okay," Jared murmurs against his jawline. "Me too." He pulls out his fingers and sits up, just enough to open one of the foil packets and roll the condom down over his stiff cock. Jensen can't take his eyes off Jared's hands. Jared grins at him. "I couldn't call you and invite you over," he admits, sounding almost shy again. "I wanted to, after I kissed you. But I couldn't make myself. But you were right there in my store, and it was easy to say 'Just stay over'. You made it so easy for me."

"You're saying I'm easy?" Jensen teases.

"I'm saying you make wanting you really easy. I'm saying – I don't know what I'm saying. I'm saying I want you."

"I'm right here."

"I know." Jared's voice drops. He spreads Jensen's thighs and guides himself into Jensen's body, breathing out as he starts to move.

Jensen wraps his legs around Jared's waist and tries to meet Jared's thrusts. This is everything he was expecting – Jared is heavy on top of him and long inside him and he bites his lip to keep from moaning.

"It's okay," Jared murmurs against his lips. "The neighbors are out."

The bed creaks as they rock together, as they pant and groan and Jensen suddenly realizes that he has no idea where Sadie is. Is she – is she *watching them*?

"Where's Sadie?" he asks.

"In the bathroom." Jared chuckles, rests his forehead against Jensen's. "I can't fuck in front of her." He lifts his head and licks at Jensen's lips. "You want an aud– "

"No! Don't stop."

Jared says nothing, just sits up, bends Jensen's legs back so his knees are near his shoulders, and pushes against his calves. Jensen can feel his hips tilting, can feel Jared leaning over him, changing the angle of his thrusts.

"Okay?" Jared breathes. Jensen nods. Now Jared lifts Jensen's legs against his own shoulders and leans closer. Jensen's hips push up against him. "You feel so good."

"So do you."

"Yeah?" Jared's grin splits his face. Jensen wants to kiss him so badly, wants to bite his lips and suck on his tongue and steal his breath. He wants Jared to pound into him, and he wants Jared to take his time, and doesn't know what he wants, other than everything.

He wonders if sex with Jared is so good because sex with his ex wasn't. Is Jared just good in comparison?

No. Jared is good because he wants Jensen, because Jensen wants him, because they like each other – might even love each other – and are comfortable around each other, because they both care about making the other happy.

He's just better in bed, period.

"Tell me about this," Jared murmurs, fingers and then lips brushing over Jensen's upper arm, across his only tattoo, the roses (yellow, of course) and the black-and-white image of his grandfather's old Nikon unspooling a curl of film. "Tell me later. I want to know."

Of course, Jensen thinks. *Anything you want*. He can feel his toes flexing with his building need, his desire to do something, grab something, feel more and more. He wraps one arm around Jared's shoulders and slides the other down Jared's back to squeeze his ass and pull him closer.

Jared thrusts deep, pumping steadily and easily, his flushed face hanging over Jensen's, lower lip caught in his teeth as he moves in and out and watches Jensen's face.

Jensen wants to photograph him. He wants to capture that look on Jared's face forever, that look of desire and concentration and care. He wants to photograph Jared's body, his hands, his hair in his face, his shoulders, his long legs, his ass, his cock. Everything. He wants to capture Jared's soul on film so he can carry it around with him, to keep him company and keep him calm and remind him that there's beauty in the world, that there's more to life than his bar and his photography, that here is someone who loves him.

Jared presses his lips to Jensen's, and Jensen's mouth opens for his tongue. They kiss distractedly, hips rocking together, and then Jared pulls away and puts his hands down on the mattress and pushes himself up.

"I think, I think," he pants, "I'm gonna – I'm gonna come. I'm sorry, I can't - " His thrusts pick up speed, his cock driving faster and harder into Jensen's ass, and then he's gasping and groaning and Jensen can feel him let go.

"Shit," Jared says, trying to catch his breath. "You're just – you're – I couldn't help it." He sits up and back, wraps his long fingers around Jensen's straining cock. Jensen's breath catches in anticipation, and he's torn between Jared's hand and Jared's face as Jared jerks him off with tight, fast strokes.

He groans as he comes over Jared's hand. Jared grins at him.

"You're amazing," Jared says.

"Me?" Jensen repeats. "What did I do?"

"Everything." Jared leans down and kisses him again, and now that they're no longer in a hurry, they can concentrate on the kiss and take their time.

Eventually Jared sits up, pulls out, and goes into the bathroom, where Jensen can hear him flush the condom and splash water on his face. Sadie, now freed, runs into the bedroom and jumps on the bed. She tries to lick his face, and he laughs and pushes her away.

"Sadie!" Jared calls from the bathroom. "Leave him alone!"

"It's okay," Jensen calls back. "She's just wishing me a good morning." Sadie jumps off the bed and runs back into the bathroom. Jensen stretches, feeling every muscle in his body in a pleasant kind of way. He's a little sweaty and a little sticky and utterly, absurdly happy.

Jared comes out of the bathroom, naked and beautiful, his cock soft now and hanging between his thighs. Jensen gets a good look at Jared's tattoo, which is then obscured as Jared runs his hands through his hair. "What's that look for?" he asks, grinning, and suddenly Jensen realizes he's smiling wide enough to split his face.

"Nothing. I'm just in a really good mood."

"Yeah?" Jared sits on the bed, still grinning. "How weird. Me too." He leans down and brushes his lips across Jensen's. "If you get dressed," he murmurs, "we can take Sadie to the dog park and I can introduce you to some of my friends and their dogs. And I can introduce them to you. Later we can, um, if you have time - "

"We can come back here and tear each other's clothes off," Jensen answers.

"Yeah." Jared presses his forehead to Jensen's. "If you have time."

"I might. Now let me up."

So Jared does, and Jensen relieves himself, washes his face, and gets dressed in the same clothes he wore yesterday. He sniffs his pits, finds them acceptable, and borrows a comb while Jared brushes his teeth.

"Thank you," Jensen says quietly, as Jared opens the door to leave.

"For what?"

"Last night. This morning. I wanted you too, I was just too tired to realize it. So thanks for asking me to stay."

Jared laughs. "What if I told you I was really nervous you'd say no?"

"I'd tell you that you didn't have to be."

"I know, but it's always nerve-racking asking the guy you really like if he wants to sleep with you. I

thought you'd say yes, I just wasn't sure you'd say yes right now."

Sadie is trying to push her way past the two of them and into the hallway. "I think right now we should take the dog out. But don't worry about me or what I want from you. Whatever you want or need, I'll do it."

"Anything?" Jared looks sly.

"Almost anything."

Sadie jerks on the leash. Jensen gives Jared a brief kiss, just in case his future intentions aren't clear enough, and they go down the stairs and outside and off to the dog run.

Only one of Jared's friends is there – Mark, an Englishman who plays french horn for the opera and owns two fat, friendly pugs named after British politicians.

Jensen says "Who's a good boy? You are, you're a good boy," when one of them offers a paw when prompted to shake.

"They're both girls," Jared explains.

Mark chuckles. "It's a common mistake. Especially since this one's first name is Benjamin." The pug in question plops down on Mark's feet, snorting contentedly. Sadie nudges the other one, apparently wanting to play, but the second pug is having none of it. "So you're the one he wasn't sure about."

"I am?" Jensen says, looking quizzically at Jared. He now knows how unsure Jared was about kissing him and asking him to stay the night, but it wouldn't have occurred to him that Jared was telling other people about it.

"I needed advice," Jared says, shrugging. "I didn't tell anyone anything really private. I mean, there wasn't anything private to tell."

"How long have you - " Mark starts to ask, gesturing between Jared and Jensen.

"We just had breakfast," Jared interrupts.

Jensen can feel himself blushing with imminent embarrassment, so to change the subject, he asks Mark about playing in the Met's orchestra. What are they currently performing? How long has he been doing it? Is he married, does he have kids, who looks after the dogs while he's working? Mark volunteers a lot of it, so Jensen doesn't have to ask very many potentially nosy getting-to-know-you questions, and soon they're talking about dogs and hobbies and the bar and Jensen's photography, which Jared brings up.

"I wanted Mark to know more about you," he explains, as they're walking back to the bookstore. "I think the photography stuff is really cool."

"I liked him," Jensen says. "I liked his dogs, too."

"They're really spoiled. Sometimes when it's hot out he'll bring them to the dog run in a stroller so they

don't have to overheat on the walk over. David and I tease him a lot. David's my other dog run friend. He must've left early today."

"I'll meet him eventually. Next time we just have to leave your place earlier."

"Next time we can go to the dog run first so we have a lot more time to mess up the bed afterwards." Jared grins. Sadie sees another dog at the end of the block and pulls on the leash. Jared has her walking very close to him, but she manages to get a few feet ahead before he can yank her back.

"She just wants to make friends," Jensen says. He leans around Jared to say "Don't you, Sadie? You just want more friends."

The dog at the end of the block crosses the street with its person, rendering the problem moot. Jensen chuckles. He can't believe what a good day he's having, walking the West Village with Jared and his dog, heading back to Jared's apartment to have sex for a second time.

They stop in the bookstore so Jared can check on the place and introduce Jensen to Osric, who offers to watch Sadie for a few hours. He doesn't add "So you and your boyfriend can have some private time," but Jensen can read it on his face. Or maybe he's just projecting.

There's only one customer in the store, standing so quietly that Jensen doesn't even know she's there until she pipes up with "Excuse me - what's 'Weird'?"

Jared points to Osric, who grins and says "Me." The customer looks unimpressed.

"Lovecraft," Jared clarifies. "*House of Leaves*. The rest of Mark Danielewski's books. William S Burroughs. Fiction that crosses genres. Fiction that doesn't have a genre. The strange and unusual."

"I, myself, am strange and unusual," Osric continues.

"Uh... okay," the customer says. "I'm looking for, uh, China Melville? It's called *Perdita Something*?"

"Miéville. Sounds like you want *Perdido Street Station*."

"That's why I couldn't find it. Do you have it?"

"Let's go look." Osric waves Jared and Jensen off. "I got this. Everything's under control." He leads the confused shopper back into the store. Sadie walks in a tight circle and flops onto the floor by the front counter. Jared and Jensen go upstairs.

Now that they're alone, they can take their time with each other. Jensen has other things he needs to be doing, and he knows Jared does too, but for this one thing, this one person, he can make an exception. He runs his finger around the outline of Jared's tattoo.

"I got that when I was a sophomore at NYU, so I wouldn't forget where I came from," Jared says. "It's a boring story. Tell me about yours."

Jensen turns his arm, remembering conversations with tattoo artists in two states. "I had the camera and

film done when I was still in Houston," he says, "because it was an important part of me. It's supposed to be my grandfather's camera. The roses were done here, to remind me of home. Not much different from you."

"Are you ever going to fill in the empty frames on the roll of film?"

"No, probably not. They can stand for anything," he explains, watching Jared's finger tracing around the edges of the tattooed strip of blank negatives. He shivers under Jared's light touch. "I can mentally fill them in or erase them when new things happen to me, or when I meet new people or do new things." He tilts Jared's chin up and kisses his mouth. "I can keep all the pictures in my head," he murmurs against Jared's lips, "so no one has to see them. They can be anything I want. They can be all mine."

"Like the lights on the crane," Jared breathes.

"Like the lights on the crane." Jensen grins and kisses him again, biting gently at Jared's lips.

"Like me."

"Like you."

Jensen hopes everything with Jared is this easy, this simple. He knows it won't be – no relationship worth having is without its hitches and tangles – but for now, he can hope. He can enjoy Jared's presence next to him, Jared's touch, Jared's mouth, and he can enjoy the pleasure of Jared wanting to introduce Jensen to his friends, and the anticipation of introducing his own friends to Jared. He can enjoy the comfort of Jared's bed and the solidity of Jared's body and the damp heat of Jared's breath.

And he can enjoy the hard length of Jared inside him, and the intensity of Jared's tongue in his mouth, and the slow, easy motion of Jared's thrusts.

Jared wraps his arms around Jensen's head and Jensen wraps his legs around Jared's waist and they moan softly as they rock together, taking their time, neither of them in any hurry. Jensen lets himself forget every other thing he could be doing. Nothing else is this important.

This time Jensen comes first, aided by Jared's hand on his cock and the increasing speed and power of Jared's hips pistoning in and out, and no sooner has he started to come back to himself than Jared is gasping for breath and slamming into him and climaxing as well.

"Fuck me," he pants, when he's finally finished.

"Not yet," Jensen answers, still a little out of breath. Jared laughs, a soft hitching of breath, and presses his forehead to Jensen's.

"That was so good. Just as good as the first time. Maybe even better."

"It was better. You were – you're incredible." Jensen pushes Jared's head up so he can look him in the eyes. Jared is flushed and his hair is hanging in his face and he's grinning just a little and he's so beautiful like that, Jensen can't believe his luck. He seems to have acquired a boyfriend who's hot and funny and cheerful and friendly and smart, who likes dogs and understands what it's like to work the late

shift.

Jared gets a lot of credit for that. But Jensen can pat himself on the back for his very first trip out here, that night in January when he thought he might be ready to maybe begin looking for a nice boy to share his life with, and he remembered Jared from Danneel and Genevieve's party. If he hadn't done that, who knows where he'd be right now. Brooklyn, no doubt. Maybe Queens. But not in the Village, tangled in someone else's sheets, the taste of someone else's mouth on his tongue and the weight of someone else's body on top of him.

"So can I tell people about my boyfriend now?" Jared asks. "Instead of just a friend I really like?"

"Yeah. You can. Just... nothing about how good I am in bed, okay? I'm not going to tell people that you're a great kisser."

"I'm a great kisser?"

"You're okay." Jensen shrugs, or at least tries to, considering Jared is still lying on him.

"Who said you were good in bed, anyway?" As Jensen is protesting, Jared drops a kiss on his nose, pulls out, and goes into the bathroom, stretching his arms over his head as he goes. Jensen takes a moment to just enjoy the view.

"You wanna shower?" Jared asks, sticking his head out of the bathroom as Jensen is looking for his clothes. "We should both fit." His eyebrows jump up and down suggestively. Jensen knows neither of them is ready to go again, but his cock twitches half-heartedly anyway. A naked Jared is very tempting.

"Don't you have things to do?" he asks. "I mean besides me."

"Yeah, but it's a nice idea." He shuts the bathroom door just enough for privacy. Jensen finishes getting dressed and puts his shoes on. Jared comes out of the bathroom. "When can I see you again?"

"When do you have time?"

"I'm here until five every morning. When do you have time?"

"Can I call you? Or you can call me. Come by the bar when you get a chance, so you can meet my bartenders. Or Chris. But call first, so you know I'm there."

"I want to see your studio, too." Jared pulls underwear and a t-shirt out of his dresser and puts them on. Jensen is relieved that he no longer has to stare at Jared naked and imagine what that body would look like underneath him, although the t-shirt is a little tight and pulls across Jared's chest and shoulders, which doesn't help Jensen's mental pictures at all.

"Next time I should bring my camera," he muses. Jared strikes a pose, laughing.

"Photograph me like your French girls, Jack," he croons. Jensen walks up to him and flicks him on the nose.

"Smartass."

"Better than being a dumbass." Jared goes into the other room. Jensen grabs his jacket and heads for the front door.

"I had a really good time," he says. "Aside from the sex. I just had a really good time with you."

"I did too," Jared tells him, pulling him close and kissing him. "We should do it again."

"We will. Soon."

Another kiss, and he leaves. He's whistling by the time he walks out the door of the building and onto the sidewalk.



AJ takes the first half of September off for vaguely-explained "family reasons", necessitating a rejiggering of the schedule and allowing everyone at The Moose and Mayhem to pick up some more hours. (Except for Anton, who is content to relieve Jared at five every morning and leave it at that.)

Students come back to school and things are nicely busy. Rob, one of the former employees, publishes his third book and Jared lets Kim arrange a reading and book signing. The space they have for these kinds of things fills right up, to the point that latecomers end up standing against the shelves. Rob is almost insufferably pleased. He stays later than planned to chat with a couple of readers and sign some extra books – Genevieve thinks it's partly because the weather is so hot and the store is so nicely air-conditioned – and after a while Jared has to ask them to please move because they're in the way of himself and Genevieve putting the chairs away.

Jensen calls not five minutes after Rob and the readers finally leave. Genevieve has gone to get some iced coffee and Jared is alone in the store except for a middle-aged woman in a flowered dress browsing the cookbooks.

"I just wanted to say hi," Jensen says. "We're having a bourbon tasting tomorrow. You should come."

"And try and run my store while buzzed," Jared says, although he has to admit, it does sound like fun. The bar has started doing regular tastings, because line-dance nights are still absurdly popular and they're trying to spread the love around.

Jensen snorts. "We feed you. We don't want people drinking on an empty stomach. You're cute when you're buzzed, though."

"Yeah, but that's brunch and I have time for a nap between the drinking and the working."

They've discovered that brunch is a good time to see each other, and one of the things that makes it a good time is that they can both drink if they want, with enough time to let the alcohol work its way through their systems before either of them has to be sharp for work. Jared has also discovered that Jensen thinks he's really, really cute when he's kind of drunk, which is oddly encouraging. Also, oddly hot.

"So one night you'll ask someone to stay late. If you feel wobbly after tasting our amazing selection of scotches, you can sleep it off at my place."

"I'll think about it. How's the new menu?"

"Doing great. Chris won't shut up about it. Did I tell you the cook left?"

"No."

"He did. His girlfriend got a really good job in Austin, of all places, so he's moving with her. We lucked out, though – he knew someone to replace him. Her name's Traci. She's really good. She won't let Chris order her around." He chuckles. "He won't let her make her own fried chicken, though. I'll bring you something tomorrow night. We'll have dinner."

"Sounds good." The woman in the flowered dress brings a couple of cookbooks to the counter, a used edition of *Beard on Bread* and a new dessert cookbook. "I have a customer. I gotta go."

"Okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Love you."

"I love you too. Bye."

They hang up. The woman with the cookbooks smiles at Jared. "I'm getting dinner tomorrow," he tells her as he rings up her books. "It's probably the only way we'll get to see each other."

"Different schedules?" she asks.

"We're just both busy. It's okay. We find time." He lets himself smile at the memory of the various times he and Jensen have found for each other, and the way they can carve out a few hours when they want to. He likes having a boyfriend who keeps more or less the same hours he does.

The only problem is that those hours are really full, for various reasons that include "can't afford to pay someone else to cover the overnight shift" and "still working out the kinks from suddenly turning into a real restaurant" and "hipsters have discovered line-dancing".

The woman pays for her books, declines a bag, and wishes Jared a good time tomorrow with his dinner companion. He doesn't realize until after she's gone that she didn't make any assumptions about who that companion is. She didn't assume he has a girlfriend, or a wife, but neither did she assume he has a boyfriend, or a husband. He likes that. Jensen could be anyone, even just a platonic friend, and no one would care, as long as he and Jared enjoy being with each other.

Which they do.

The door opens to admit two guys, a black guy in a pink polo shirt and a white guy in a t-shirt with the Oscar Meyer Weinermobile on it. They both look a little sweaty. It must still be really hot out. Jared is suddenly reminded to check the water bowl he puts outside for any dogs that wander by, and to refill it with fresh water.

"Do you ever replay what you just said and wonder 'Why did I say the thing?' and want to smack yourself in the face?" Pink Polo is asking, as the two guys walk in.

"All the time," Weinermobile admits.

"Do you have any knitting books?" Pink Polo asks Jared. "Sweater patterns, that kind of thing."

"Arts and Crafts," Jared says, pointing to the back of the store. "Everything's organized by craft. We should have a couple for knitters." He imagines Pink Polo sitting next to a basket full of balls of yarn, long needles clacking as he knits a sweater.

The two guys return to the counter ten minutes later with a book of patterns for various knitted animals and toys. Pink Polo explains that it's for his sister. Jared says he doesn't judge. Weinermobile snickers. Pink Polo pays with cash, and they leave.

Late in the afternoon, Jared is down behind the front counter sorting the mail orders and separating them from the local deliveries when a male voice over his head says "Hey down there - is Genevieve here?"

Jared stands up. The guy who was asking has a square face and a dark blue t-shirt. Standing just behind him and looking expectant is another guy with facial scruff and a red-and-white-striped polo shirt that makes him look a little bit like Waldo, from the books. There's a big, shiny, purple metal tackle box sitting on the counter.

"I'm hair," the guy in the striped polo explains.

"And I'm makeup," adds the first guy, patting the tackle box. "Danny sent us."

"Uh," Jared says, stupidly. He leans over the counter to get a better view of the store and yells "Genevieve! There are strange guys here to see you!"

"What strange guys?" she yells back.

"Hair and makeup?"

Hair slings an elaborate backpack off his shoulder and rummages around in it. When Genevieve appears, looking confused, he pulls out a round brush, brandishing it like a weapon.

"We're here to make you pretty," he explains dramatically. "Well. Prettier."

"Danny sent us," Makeup repeats. Genevieve's face brightens.

"Oh thank god," she says. "You guys are angels."

"We're going to take over your bathroom," Makeup tells Jared. "Is that okay?"

"No," Jared says. When Makeup looks a little taken aback - and Genevieve looks annoyed - he adds "The store bathroom is tiny and the light's terrible. You can go upstairs and use my place. My bathroom's tiny too, but you'll have the whole apartment." He pulls his house keys out of his pocket and hands them to Genevieve, explaining which key fits which lock.

"Thank you." She blows him a kiss and takes Hair and Makeup into the back of the store so she can collect her dress and shoes, and then leads them back through the store and outside to Jared's apartment.

The three of them come back almost an hour later. Genevieve's face is made up with what even Jared can recognize as great skill, her hair is piled up in deliberately messy curls, and her spangled green dress is slit up the side. She's carrying a little gold clutch purse in one hand and her garment bag in the other. Hair and Makeup both look absurdly pleased with themselves.

"You look gorgeous," Jared says, amazed at the transformation. "Where are you going?" Whatever occasion this is, it must be something important.

"Danny's agency is having an anniversary party," she explains. "It's a big formal thing." In addition to bartending, Danneel works as a hand model. Jared is pretty sure that those are exceptionally incompatible professions, but neither of her careers seems to suffer.

"The guys wanted you to see me," Genevieve goes on. She gestures at Hair and Makeup, who beam.

"We want to show her off," Hair explains.

"We took pictures," Makeup adds.

"Don't share them yet," Genevieve tells them. She hands Jared her garment bag and vanishes into the back of the store, presumably to get her jacket.

"Don't say anything about the jacket," Makeup tells Jared. "It doesn't go at all. And it's too hot to be wearing it, anyway."

"You did a really great job," Jared says. Hair and Makeup high-five each other.

Genevieve returns carrying what looks suspiciously like a black suit jacket. "Can you hang on to my clothes?" she asks Jared. "I'll come get them tomorrow."

"Yeah, sure. Have a good time."

"I will." She blows kisses all around and skips off down the sidewalk.

"We did good," Hair says. Makeup nods. "Danny will be pleased."

They wish Jared a good night and leave as well.

The store is busier than normal that night, probably because of the unusual heat. Jared goes up to his apartment for five minutes to make sure his A/C is on and Sadie isn't sweltering to death, and when he comes back there are three girls who look like college students standing on the sidewalk, waiting for him and talking about something called *The Raven Cycle*. He lets them in and they head for the young adult section, still chatting. That explains why he doesn't know what they're talking about – Kim is the YA expert.

He should know, though. It's his store, after all.

The girls don't buy anything, but he doesn't mind. They talk like readers, and his store is open at all hours to accommodate people like them, who may or may not buy something but who want to be able to visit a bookstore at one in the morning. Besides, it's hot at night and from what he remembers, dorm room air conditioning can be inconsistent.

At almost three he gets a customer he actually knows, a guy named Chris who works in advertising. He comes in every so often when he can't sleep, which he once admitted to Jared was because he has anxiety and it gives him insomnia. He's getting into Buddhism, and every so often he feels the need to talk to Jared about it. Jared took a comparative religions class in college, but it was a survey course and while they did a unit on Buddhism, it was fairly general and he doesn't remember much of it.

But tonight Chris apparently can't talk about anything except the ad campaign he has to present in a couple of days. "I'm not a suit," he says. "I'm not a money guy. I'm the creative. I don't know how to talk to money guys."

"Haven't you done this before?" Jared asks.

"Yeah. You'd think I'd know how to deal with it, so I don't know why there's so much noise in my brain right now. I can't separate anything out."

"That's why I'm here." Jared smiles in a way he hopes is reassuring. He knows from past experience that eventually Chris will calm down enough to go home and theoretically to sleep. Jared just has to exude zen in the meantime.

Chris' phone rings. He thumbs the screen, stares at whatever he's just been sent, and laughs.

"What?" Jared asks. Chris hands him the phone so Jared can see the photo that someone has just sent him, which shows a tall, good-looking blond guy, his face split by the biggest, widest grin. There's a koala clinging to his leg.

"Australians," Chris explains. "That's my roommate. He's home for his parents' anniversary. He says 'Can I keep him? I promise to feed him and walk him.'" He chuckles. "I needed to see that."

"You feel any better?"

"A little, yeah. I can't call my mom this late, you know what I mean? And he's on the other side of the world." He shakes the phone, meaning he's talking about his roommate, and then puts it in his pocket. "I think I'll walk home. That should help."

"Good luck with your presentation," Jared says.

"Thanks. I'm gonna need it." Chris sighs. "Why did I want a career where I have to make presentations to total strangers? It's like I'm always putting myself on the line. Well, you do the best you can, and either you get it or you don't."

"When you do, you can come back and buy something to celebrate."

"Maybe I will. Thanks for listening." And he leaves.

Jared leans on the counter and thinks about anxiety, and how lucky he is that he doesn't suffer from the same kind of sleepless worry that Chris does. He loves to talk about the bookstore, and if he has to have a business conversation, he preps as well as he can, brings Chad, and hopes for the best. He doesn't lose sleep over it. He's not wired for that kind of nervousness, and he feels bad that Chris is.

As if to further clarify that thought process, after Anton shows up at five, Jared goes upstairs, checks on Sadie, who's still not overheating, and falls right to sleep. He doesn't even mind that he's sleeping alone, because he knows that somewhere in Brooklyn, Jensen is sleeping alone too, and at some point they'll get to sleep together.

The next night he's talking to his friend Misha when Jensen arrives with the promised dinner in a paper bag printed with the logo for Two Brothers.

"I come bearing food," Jensen announces. "Starve no more."

"You've met each other, right?" Jared says to Jensen. "This is Misha. Misha, this is my boyfriend Jensen. Tell him what happened today. Misha works at the UN," he explains.

"What happened?" Jensen asks, putting the bag of dinner on the counter. Jared opens it and peeks inside, trying to count the containers and breathing in the mixed scent of take-out.

"A Ukrainian ambassador went on a rant for almost an hour and a half," Misha says. "He wore out five translators. One of the French translators has only been there two days. The ambassador had to be interrupted before he wound down. Everyone went out for a drink afterwards – we all needed one – but I came here."

"I'm better than beer," Jared says, beaming. Misha nods. "So what did you bring me?"

"It's a surprise," Jensen tells him. "I'm sorry I didn't bring enough for three," he tells Misha apologetically. Misha looks in the bag.

"It doesn't look like you brought enough for two," he comments. "Enough for one moose, though."

Jared grins. "What can I say? I'm still a growing boy."

"Uh-huh. I bet you want to eat, and not here. People probably complain if there's sauce on the books."

"No one has yet. Oh! I didn't tell you!" He gestures to Misha and Jensen, because this is news he can share with everyone. "Genevieve's engaged! You probably know that," he says to Jensen, who nods. It seems a safe bet that Danneel would have called the bar with her side of the news. "I asked if she wanted to have her reception here or at Two Brothers."

Misha looks around the store, apparently measuring it for size. "You could host the bridal shower," he suggests.

"We might be doing the rehearsal dinner," Jensen says. "I don't know, though. All Danny wanted to tell us was how she proposed."

"Was it romantic?"

"They went up to the top of the Empire State Building."

"Wow," Jared says. "Gen didn't tell me that part. It's like you taking me up to your roof to show me the loading crane."

"Oh?" Misha says, in a tone of voice that Jared recognizes really means "There's a story there and now I want to hear it".

"Except I didn't propose," Jensen says, in a different tone of voice that Jared recognizes really means "Let's change the subject and that was private".

"No one's here but me," Jared tells him. "Osric had to go to the drugstore. When he gets back we can eat." He opens the bag again. "What'd you bring me?"

"Fried chicken, carrot salad, cole slaw, Grandma Kane's banana cream pie, short ribs, and, shit, what else did I bring?" Jensen pulls the bag towards himself and takes out a couple of styrofoam containers. "We get a lot of grief for using styrofoam, so we're on the lookout for biodegradable containers we can afford. Chris found a manufacturer on Staten Island, but their stuff's a little more expensive than we want. We're almost breaking even."

"Even with line-dance nights?"

"I mean with the menu. It's so much fucking work." He opens a styrofoam box and says "Fried pickles, that's it." He offers the container to Misha and Jared, who each take a fried pickle chip. The pickles are a little soggy, but Jared guesses that's because they've been steaming in styrofoam all the way from Brooklyn, and steam is not conducive to a crisp cornmeal coating. "Traci loves to fry. You should try the chicken. It's better fresh, but at least it's not cold."

The door opens, admitting Osric and a giant plastic bag from Duane Reade. He sees the paper sack on the counter and the box of fried pickles in Jensen's hand and his eyes light up. "Who brought dinner?" he asks.

"Pickle?" Jensen offers. Osric wrinkles his nose.

"It's good for you," Misha says. "Puts hair on your chest." He grins.

"Fried in cornmeal," Jensen goes on. "Fresh from Red Hook. No sauce."

Osric takes one, chews reflectively, swallows, takes another, and says "Okay, I'm sold." He holds up the bag for Jared to see. "Got toilet paper. Also paper towels. Also chocolate."

"I'm going upstairs in a minute to eat," Jared tells him. "I'll bring Sadie down to keep you company." There was a pair of very excitable terriers in the store earlier – the kind of excitable that comes from thinking every turf is your turf – and he had to take her up to the apartment to calm her down. But now he wants some time alone with Jensen, and as much as he loves his dog, he'd like some privacy so he can make out with his boyfriend.

"I should go home," Misha says. "See the wife, kiss the kid. Speak English for a while. Nice to meet you," he says to Jensen, and then leaves.

Osric takes the paper goods and the chocolate into the office, and when he returns Jared says "I'll be back before you go," and picks up the bag of dinner and takes Jensen upstairs.

Jared gets out plates and glasses and silverware and two bottles of beer. While Jensen takes Sadie downstairs, Jared fills up two plates with food and sets everything on the coffee table. Jensen comes back with a handful of miniature Hershey bars, apparently from Osric's foray to the drugstore. It's Saturday, so Jared finds college football on TV. He's not emotionally invested in either team, but he doesn't have to be to enjoy the game.

Jensen is only half interested, and they end up talking about the bar and its new menu and how much more work it is than either he or Chris expected.

"How are the other bartenders holding up?" Jared asks.

"Alona's waitressed before so that part's easy for her, and they already had to go around sometimes and take orders and get dirty glasses off the tables. But learning the menu and coordinating with the kitchen and even sometimes just having enough people there to cover everything - that's hard. And so far it's just dinner and Sunday brunch. What happens when we decide to move to lunch too? Chris and I did some recon at other restaurant-bars and gastropubs, but their serving staff is separate from the bar staff. And we're all doing everything." He sighs and sips his beer. "Traci's really on the ball, I mean she's great, we really lucked out, and Chris isn't getting in her way any more and is actually letting her do her job. I probably shouldn't complain that we seem to be doing well, but Jesus, Jared, it's so much fucking work. We opened a restaurant. We already have a bar, but – I don't know, man." He leans back against the couch. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Unloading all over you."

"You're my boyfriend. That's what you do. I mean, that's what I do. I mean. Um. I'm supposed to listen. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Do you still think it was a good idea?"

"Adding a kitchen? Yeah, I think. People seem to like it. Did I say we're doing pretty well in terms of customers?" Jared nods. "So that's good. We still get a lot of people for line-dance nights. I can't believe it. Steve loves it. He gets people square dancing. We don't really have the space for that, but it's fun."

Jared still hasn't met Steve, but he knows the guy is an old friend of Chris' and the two of them play in a band together. He's pretty sure the band is just for kicks and giggles, but Steve is actually serious about a music career, square dancing at Two Brothers notwithstanding.

"I don't want to talk about it any more," Jensen says. "I haven't even had time to go out to Queens and mess around in the darkroom. I'm lucky I even have any time to take pictures. Tell me about the bookstore."

"It's fine. We had an author signing yesterday, a former employee actually – Rob, he's a good guy – it was so full, people had to stand. Rob signed some books for us. I have a bunch of deliveries to make tomorrow, I took a bunch of mail orders to the post office today, we're not losing money, and college kids are back, so more people are showing up really late. You know Genevieve got engaged. It's good. Everything's good."

"Good." Jensen is looking at him with an expression Jared can't quite identify, so Jared does the thing that seems to make the most sense, and leans over to kiss him.

That's clearly the right decision. Jensen cups the back of Jared's head, and Jared puts his hand on the back of Jensen's neck. Jensen tastes like barbecue sauce and cold carrot salad and beer, and his mouth is lazy on Jared's and his hand is firm against Jared's head and Jared completely forgets that he has to go back downstairs eventually, that Osric will have to go home, that his store will need looking after.

Soon Jared is kneeling on the floor between Jensen's thighs, head bobbing up and down as he sucks Jensen's cock. He glances up to see Jensen watching him, lips parted and breath shallow. Jensen tangles his fingers in Jared's hair. Jared grins, pulls off Jensen's cock with a pop, and twists his hand around the base as he teases the head with his tongue. Now Jensen moans. Jared wants to get him off, wants to see his face when he comes, but at the same time he himself is growing hard inside his jeans and part of him wants to yank Jensen's pants all the way down, turn him sideways on the couch, and fuck him into the cushions.

"Ahh... Jared," Jensen pants. "Don't stop."

So that answers that. Jared swallows as much of Jensen as he can, hand inside Jensen's jeans to fondle his balls, mouth working in earnest. He watches Jensen's chest heaving, watches his shoulders hitch, and he adds the tiniest edge of teeth and some pressure from his tongue and then Jensen is coming, breath stuttering as he empties himself down Jared's throat.

Jared keeps sucking until Jensen is completely empty, and then he licks him clean and sits back, trying to catch his own breath. He's never particularly liked the taste of come, but he likes sucking cock, and a bitter trail down his throat is a small price to pay for the earthy musk of a man's dick in his mouth and

the pleasure on that man's face.

"God damn," Jensen pants. "Jesus, Jared."

Jared just grins. He's so hard now he doesn't know what to do. He shifts a little on his knees, trying to ease the ache, wondering what option out of several he wants to take. Jensen tucks himself back in, zips himself up, grabs Jared's shirt, and pulls him onto the couch. A little shifting, a couple of awkward elbows and knees, and Jared is half on top of Jensen on the couch, Jensen fumbling with the button and then the zipper on his jeans. Jared's breath catches.

"My turn," Jensen murmurs, pulling Jared's head close to his with one hand while his other hand shoves down inside Jared's jeans to fondle his cock.

"Hnn," Jared breathes into Jensen's mouth, grinding down on him and rubbing against his hand. He's trying to wriggle out of his jeans enough to give Jensen more room, but the way they're lying makes it difficult.

"Okay, okay." Jensen takes the hint, shifting his ass and trying to push Jared out of the way just enough to free him. And then he is free, more or less, and Jensen wraps his fingers around Jared's straining cock and strokes in earnest.

Jared moans into Jensen's mouth, relieved and turned on and apparently so hungry for Jensen's touch that it seems to take no time at all before he's frantically fucking Jensen's hand and coming on both of them.

"Was that what you were expecting when you brought me dinner?" Jared asks after a minute.

"The thought did cross my mind. Was I a good dessert?"

"The best. I love your cock."

"I love you."

"You're just saying that because I give great head."

"Maybe." Jensen licks at his lips. "You do, though."

Jared's been told that before. Even Milo, his last ex, after they broke up, admitted that he missed the blow jobs.

"You have to go, don't you," Jared says.

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I gotta relieve Osric anyway, so he can go home." He glances down at himself, at the come drying sticky on his and Jensen's thighs. "And I should change." He rolls off the couch, zips himself back up, and goes into the bedroom. By the time he's found and changed into clean pants and underwear, Jensen is in the bathroom dabbing at the dried spunk on his own jeans. Jared leans around him and kisses him on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Jensen asks, not even looking up.

"Nothing," Jared says cheerfully. He wanders off to get his shoes.

They kiss one more time on the way out of the apartment, and then at the door of the building, and then Jensen goes back to Brooklyn and Jared goes into the store. Sadie is glad to see him, Osric no less so because now that he's off work he can meet his girlfriend for ice cream.



One morning at the very end of September, Jared is woken out of a sound sleep by the screech of tires and the sound of crunching metal and breaking glass. Sadie jumps off the bed and he's not far behind. It sounded close, as if whatever just happened was right under his window. He pushes the curtain aside and looks out, and he must be dreaming, because there's a car up on the sidewalk, its front end covered in shattered glass from The Moose and Mayhem's window.

The phone rings as he's grabbing his keys and running out of the apartment. He has to shove Sadie out of the doorway to keep her from following him. He runs down the stairs and outside to discover a man standing on the sidewalk, yelling at the woman leaning out of the passenger-side window of the car, while Anton is struggling to get out of the store with a cell phone at his ear, probably trying to call Jared. He should be calling the cops.

And Jared just stands there in his bare feet, still wearing his pajama bottoms and the long-sleeve t-shirt he slept in, his mouth open.

A car really crashed into the front of his bookstore.

Jesus Christ.

"Jared!" Anton calls, seeing him. "I was just - "

"What the hell," Jared says. "What happened?" Anton gestures at the car. "Yeah, I see that. How?" There's no parking on this side of the street, but there isn't room for a car to swerve hard enough to jump the curb. "Call the 6th Precinct. They know me." Jeff's shift is over and he'll have gone home, but Jared knows he would have told his fellow cops about the 24-hour bookstore with the dog.

Anton calls the station. The woman in the car gets out, ineffectually slams the car door, and throws off the man when he tries to grab her arm. She stomps over to Jared and Anton.

"He was driving," she says angrily, finger stabbing in the man's direction.

"She tried to grab the wheel," the man insists.

"You drove into my store!" Jared cries, getting over his shock enough to get angry. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

The man and woman both start talking at once. Jared wants to bang their heads together.

"The cops are coming," Anton says, and sure enough, five minutes later there are two cop cars on the street and four cops getting out and milling around and asking questions. The cops talk to the man and woman from the car, they talk to Anton, they talk to Jared, they talk to a couple of eyewitnesses (a woman walking her dog and a man out for his morning run), they talk to the man and woman from the car again. Jared calls Chad. He looks at the front of his store in despair.

The cops are eventually followed by a tow truck to haul the car off the sidewalk. The woman with the dog apologizes to Jared and the cops, but she has to go, she has to get to work, here's her number if they need anything more from her.

Chad shows up. "What the hell," he says, sounding almost impressed. The car has been hauled away by now and the cops have written up the couple. Jared has their insurance information and some police paperwork, but there's still a significant amount of window glass and pieces of bumper and headlight on the sidewalk. Jared hasn't looked inside the store yet. He's afraid to.

"You have the number of someone to call to board up the window?" Chad asks Jared.

"No."

Chad flicks the paperwork the cops left, which Jared is holding limply. "It might be in here. We should go inside."

People have gathered on the sidewalk, staring and talking among themselves. Anton has already gone back inside the store, and when Jared and Chad follow, they discover him sweeping up glass and restacking all the books that were in the window. Jared thanks him, asks him to take care of the glass outside, and then follows Chad back to the office.

Four hours later a couple of guys have shown up with sheets of plywood to board up the tall gaping hole where the window used to be, the insurance company has been called, the sidewalk in front of the store has been swept clean of glass and bits of car, Anton has gone home, and Kim has arrived. And Chad and Jared have come to the terrifying conclusion that no matter what it will cost to replace the front of the store, they can't afford it.

"We're not running that much in the black," Chad explains. "You know – the profit margin's like *this*." He holds up his thumb and forefinger and presses them together. "At least we have a profit margin. That's why we have insurance, but...." He trails off. Jared knows – their rates are going up, and whatever their policy will give them, it won't be enough.

"I can't close," Jared says. "I *won't* close."

"We can stay open while - "

"No, I mean I can't go bankrupt. I can't close the store."

"You won't. We'll get a loan. People do it all the time. Don't worry, Moose. We'll figure something out."

Jared isn't so sure. He calls all his employees and manages to gather most of them that night for a meeting, even though all he has to tell them is that the store is staying open and as far as everyone is concerned, it should be business as usual.

"But the window," Genevieve says, pointing to the boarded-up space.

"What about it?" Jared asks. "We'll put those displays inside the plywood so you can see them from inside the store. You can still see out, just not there."

"I can paint it," Osric suggests. "Make it pretty."

Jared's phone picks now to ring. He glances at it, not intending to answer, but it's Jensen.

"I'm having a store meeting," Jared tells him by way of hello.

"I'll be quick," Jensen promises. "Danny just told me about the store. Are you okay?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want me to come over after I close up?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Don't panic. I'll see you later." And then, quietly, probably because people are within hearing distance, "I love you."

"I know. I mean, I do too. Sorry, I have to go." He hangs up.

He doesn't know what else to tell his employees, other than he and Chad will fix the damage but he doesn't know how long it will take, and he doesn't plan to close the store. He doesn't know if people will get more shifts, or fewer shifts. He'll know more after the insurance adjuster comes tomorrow, and after he gets some quotes for the repairs. He promises to keep everyone in the loop.

A week later he and Chad are once again sitting in the office with papers spread across the desk, Chad's tablet and Jared's laptop both displaying different bids from construction and window companies, looking at all of the numbers and time frames and trying to figure out how they'll pay for it.

"Kickstarter," Chad says.

"What?"

"Crowd-funding. We'll crowd-fund the difference."

Jared must be having an especially stupid day, because he rubs his eyes, squints at Chad, and repeats "What?"

"We'll get this much from the insurance company, right, and if we go with these guys," he taps Jared's laptop screen, "we'll have to close a couple days. So there's some money we lose there, plus the difference between what we'll get from the insurance and what the repairs will cost. If we take out a loan at... shit, where'd it go?" He shuffles papers and finally retrieves the information he got from the bank. "That's the loan, that's the rate, that's...." He grabs his tablet, closes the page showing the construction bid, brings up the calculator, and starts tapping out numbers. Jared tries to follow. "This is what we'll owe the bank," Chad says. "That's the loan, plus interest. If we crowd-fund, we get that for free."

"No we don't. Besides, I don't think that's what Kickstarter's for." He sighs. "We have to go to the bank. I'm still paying off the loan I took out to buy this place. I'm going to be in debt the rest of my life, but I can't close the store."

"We won't have to close the store. People crowd-fund their bookstores all the time – moving costs, construction, expansion. St Mark's Bookshop did it when they moved. Some woman crowd-funded the money to open a store in Queens. We'll think of some good incentives. Ask your boyfriend if he knows anyone who can offer something." Chad looks triumphant. "We'll ask for more than we need, because I think these guys are underbidding" - he points to the laptop screen again - "and if we end up with extra, we'll donate it."

"I don't know. I feel weird asking other people to pay our costs. We should be able to take care of it. It's our store."

"How long has it been here? Including when it was still Hermann's House of Books. Since the 80s, right? Didn't you tell me you sometimes get people coming in whose parents used to come here? Do you have any idea how big our customer base is?"

Jared does know, in fact. He just needs someone to remind him.

"Big enough," Chad clarifies unnecessarily. "And if it gets around social media, we can get pledges from people who've never even been here, just because they think the place should continue to exist."

"What if we don't raise enough?"

"We'll use Indiegogo or GoFundMe. They let you keep whatever you raise."

"I still don't know."

"I do. Give me half an hour and I'll knock up a financial comparison. Go get a coffee. Walk Sadie around the block. Make sure AJ isn't antagonizing any customers." He makes shooing motions with his hands. "I know what I'm talking about, Moose. You look after the store, I look after the money. Right? So let me look after the money."

"But - "

"I know, you hate the idea of asking strangers for money. Think of it as a donation."

"We're not a non-profit."

"Go!"

So Jared goes. He walks Sadie to Union Square and back, thinking about crowd-funding and how he can possibly ask people to give him money so he doesn't have to take out a loan like a normal business owner. There are some definite advantages to crowd-funding – no loans repaid with interest, for one thing – but they won't see the money right away, and they really need to get someone to come fix the front of the store as soon as possible. Osric and his girlfriend have started painting designs on the plywood and Kim had the brilliant idea to ask customers and students from NYU and kids from the Catholic school down the street to help decorate. But at the same time, it's darker in the store, and the plywood and the inexplicable leak on the floor just remind him that there's a possibility he might actually lose the place.

Maybe they can take out a loan and use Kickstarter to repay it. Or whoever they go with to fix the store, they'll just ask them to start in two months.

Except Jared doesn't want to wait two months.

"There's nothing about this that doesn't suck," he tells Sadie as they walk back. She whacks his leg with her tail while they wait for the light to change. He figures that's her way of comforting him until she can jump on him and lick his face off.

He calls Jensen.

"Chad wants to Kickstart our construction costs," he explains.

"I thought Kickstarter was for creative pursuits," Jensen says. "I donated to a campaign to restore a bunch of rolls of film that a guy's grandfather shot during World War I, and one of Chris' friends used it to fund studio time so she could finish her album. That kind of thing."

"Chad says bookstores use it all the time. I feel weird asking other people to pay for a new window, though."

"Insurance won't cover it?"

"Not all of it. We'll probably have to take out a loan, but it will take us so long to pay it back. We have a really small profit margin. Most independent bookstores do. Our insurance already went up."

"Do you want my advice?"

All Jared has wanted from him over the past week was reassurance that everything will be okay, an ear to rant into, and a little comfort. But now he doesn't know what to do, and he could use some advice.

"Do it," Jensen says, without waiting for an answer. "Chris and I will help. I can get the whole bar involved. We'll donate stuff. Danny will tell everyone she knows."

Jared remembers Danneel's friends, whose real names he never learned, who came to the store to do Genevieve's hair and makeup so she could be beautiful when Danneel proposed. They have services they might offer if asked, and from what he knows of Danneel, she might conceivably ask.

He could mention it to Mark and David, his dog run friends. He's sure at least one of Mark's musician colleagues would appreciate the continued existence of an all-hours bookstore in the city. Mark's wife is a professor at Hunter College, and he'd be surprised if her students had never taken advantage of the store at two in the morning. And David is an all-hours nerd with an all-hours nerd following, and even if he has nothing concrete to donate, he can use his time to spread the word.

Jared might not even have to ask anyone outright to help him. He can just mention his problem and someone will say "Sure, I'll tell my friends" or "I can donate an incentive". He's met enough people in his life and shared enough problems – his and theirs – to understand that people generally want to help.

He knows his bookstore is important to other folks besides himself and his employees. He keeps up with industry news and trends. He's aware of what's going on in his neighborhood and in New York as a whole. He likes to think he's pretty well-informed, and what that information has told him is that in cultural and abstract ways, The Moose and Mayhem is valuable.

"Thank you," he tells Jensen. "You're working tonight, aren't you?"

"Yeah," Jensen says. "It's line-dance night. Someday you should come."

"I can't dance. Call me after you close?"

"Will do. I'm sorry I can't come over, but I gotta be here early in the morning."

Jared squashes his disappointment.

"I can come by tomorrow afternoon," Jensen continues. "I'll bring you food."

"I love you," Jared says matter-of-factly. "I really do."

"I... didn't think that was an issue." Jensen sounds almost confused, as if Jared is answering a question he hasn't asked, or reassuring him of something he didn't need reassurance for.

"I know. I just thought I'd tell you."

"I love you too. You sound like you finally know what to do."

"I do. We'll use Kickstarter and raise the money. Chad's right. You're right. I'll talk to you later. Have fun line-dancing. Bye." He hangs up.

By the time Jared gets back to the store and leaves Sadie up front with AJ, Chad has drawn up a list of pros and cons, itemized their costs as best he can (admittedly with the vaguest numbers possible), and come up with a rough total of what their crowd-funding campaign should aim for.

"This is what I'm thinking," he tells Jared. "We run the campaign first and hire a construction company

based on what we get. We'll probably use these guys. That's their estimate, plus some extra for overruns, plus Kickstarter's percentage. If we're lucky enough to have any left after the window's in, we'll donate it to a literacy campaign, or to one of those programs that buys books for inner-city libraries and schools. We shouldn't keep it."

"I talked to Jensen and he said he'd help," Jared says. "He can probably get his bar into it."

"Good. I told you it would work out."

"What if we don't make our goal?"

"We will. Okay. Let's figure out what incentives we have to offer."



"We're doing what?" Chris says, raising an eyebrow at Jensen.

"Helping Jared with a Kickstarter campaign."

"Why?"

"Because he's my boyfriend and I want to help," Jensen says. "Obviously."

"Okay." Chris shrugs. "Does he know what he's doing?"

"With Kickstarter? I think so. If he doesn't, Chad does."

"How much are they asking for?"

"I don't know."

"What do they need from us?"

"I don't know that either."

Chris sighs. "You're not a lot of help here, Jen."

"I don't have any more information. I just thought I should let you know that I volunteered us to help out. I thought we could donate some bottles. Good stuff. I could offer prints of some of my photos or a portrait session. Tom knows a thousand people through Mike who he could ask to - "

"If it's a bookstore Kickstarter," Chris interrupts, "shouldn't all the incentives be bookstore-related? You know. Books. Literary perks." Jensen is reordering his thoughts, because that never occurred to him

and it probably should have, when Chris adds "You took some nice pictures of the public library."

"You think the Strand would get pissed if I snuck in there and photographed their shelves?"

"For someone else's Kickstarter?" Chris raises the eyebrow again.

"Yeah, maybe not. I should take pictures of The Moose and Mayhem. But I was thinking that one of the things we could offer is a party after the campaign's over, so people who live local can get their perks and celebrate the bookstore getting its funding. We'll close the bar, serve finger food, offer drinks at a discount. The first shot is free, or your first beer. If you pledge so much to the campaign, you'll get two drink tickets. Like that. Obviously we'd have to make that twenty-one and older."

"How many people are we talking?"

"I have no idea. We won't go over capacity."

Jensen calls Jared later to ask if he and Chad know how much they're going to ask for and to float the idea of a post-campaign celebration party at the bar. Jared thinks that's brilliant. He sends Jensen information on what the campaign looks like, what he and Chad are asking for, what their timetable is, what perks they've come up with so far.

"What the hell's cosplay?" Chris asks, when Jensen shares all that information with him.

"It's when fans dress up as their favorite characters from TV or the movies. Comic book fans do it a lot. One of Jared's employees is really into it. I guess it's a valuable perk."

Unsurprisingly, a number of the perks are, as Chris pointed out, bookstore-related. People can donate for a random selection book. There are signed editions, first editions, an opportunity to host your own book signing party or poetry slam. There is also, oddly enough, a pair of tickets to a matinee performance at the Metropolitan Opera.

"They really think they can raise this much?" Chris asks.

"I guess so," Jensen says. "This is going to be the weirdest collection of crowd-funding perks ever assembled."

Tom is no help and isn't sure Mike will be either. Alona says she can offer dog-walking, even though she knows it isn't much. Danneel immediately volunteers one of her friends for hairstyling services, and another friend for elaborate stage makeup.

"They made Genevieve beautiful when I proposed," she explains. "You saw the pictures."

Jensen learns that Kickstarter doesn't allow alcohol as a perk. Chris isn't upset that this means they can't offer any bottles of good bourbon as pledge rewards. But the post-campaign party is still a go. Traci gets completely into the spirit by suggesting that she could give someone cooking lessons as a perk, if Jared thought it was a good idea, and in the meantime she has some great ideas for party appetizers that she's dying to try out. If Chris and Jensen like them, maybe Chris could add them to the menu permanently.

The Kickstarter goes live in the middle of October, and Jensen realizes he's much more invested than he thought he would be when Chris points out that he's been checking the campaign's progress almost every hour for three days.

"You really do love this guy, don't you," Chris observes.

"You're just figuring that out now?" is Jensen's response. And then, because he knows it's going to come up, because it's Chris' new obsession, "We're not ready to start serving lunch."

"I wasn't going to mention it."

"You were. I could hear it on your tongue. We can barely staff brunch in addition to regular Sundays. And don't tell me we have the money to hire servers – we don't. I look at the books too, you know."

"Line-dance nights are bringing in more than they used to. I can't believe the hipsters aren't sick of us yet." He leans over and raps on Jensen's forehead with his knuckles. "Knock on wood." Jensen shoves his arm away.

"But we still have to finish paying off the kitchen," Jensen points out, "and we're paying Traci now too. You said we should try offering bands more money. I think we should wait six months and see how the kitchen's doing before we start expanding our food hours."

"Six months is next month. I've already mocked up a lunch menu." He looks insufferably pleased with himself. Jensen sighs.

"Fine. Next month we'll try lunch. Maybe Alona will want some extra hours during the day. We'll still have to hire actual servers. If we can get a couple people before we start serving lunch, we can train them at night and give Alona and Tom and Danny – and us – some breathing room."

Because the one thing that they still haven't adjusted to is the fact that most nights, weekends and line-dance nights especially, Chris and Jensen both have to be at the bar to make sure things are running smoothly, and to pick up any slack.

What this mostly means for Jensen is that on the nights he goes across the river to see Jared, he's wiped out by the time he gets to the bookstore, with just enough energy to kiss Jared hello and chat for a few minutes before he needs to take his ass up to Jared's apartment and put himself in Jared's bed. At least Sadie is used to him by now and doesn't fight him for space. The plywood covering and protecting the front of the bookstore is painful to see, but Jensen imagines that as hard as it is for him, it must be exponentially harder for Jared.

On the other hand, the plywood has been decorated inside and outside the store, so if nothing else, it looks more personalized. Jensen has even drawn a bottle and a pair of highball glasses with "Drink at Two Brothers, Red Hook" written underneath. And one night he brings his camera to Jared's place, with the hope that Jared will let him take some pictures in the morning.

Jared does. When Jensen gets a chance to process them a couple of days later, he has to call.

"It's super busy here," Jared says, sounding harried. "Can I call you later?"

"Yeah, sure," Jensen tells him. He leans back in his chair, looking at the thumbnails of digital photos on his computer screen, remembering that Jared grabbed the camera and turned it on him. He should process those few photos too, and send them along.

He does those first.

To: moose@mooseandmayhem.com

From: jackles@twobrothersnyc.com

Subj: Looks like me

Thought you might like these. We should do that again.

He lets himself think about Jared's face hanging over his, Jared's weight on top of him, Jared's cock buried inside him. He thinks about the hardness of Jared's muscles and the softness of his hair and the sharpness of his elbows. He thinks about Jared's voice waking him up in the morning. He thinks about the comfort of Jared lying next to him, fast asleep.

To: jackles@twobrothersnyc.com

From: moose@mooseandmayhem.com

Subj: Re: Looks like me

Shit, Jensen, warn me when you send me naked pictures. I'm all alone in the store and I can't stick my hand down my pants when someone might come in and need something.

Jensen laughs. That was exactly the response he was looking for.

He wants to go see Jared on Halloween, because he's never been to the Greenwich Village Halloween parade, but there's too much to do and he can't leave. His sacrifice is rewarded by a good-sized dinner crowd at the bar and Chris insisting that he wear a costume. Jensen knows that Jared has dressed Sadie up as Princess Leia, complete with hair buns and a white dress, and that Jared himself has gotten his hands on a Boba Fett costume, and that he wants Jensen to match for when Jensen comes over later.

"Han Solo?" Chris asks, as Jensen comes out of the bar office after having changed into the most last-minute Halloween costume ever. The only thing that didn't come out of his own closet is the plastic reproduction blaster hanging at his hip, which he lucked into finding at a costume shop. Chris is wearing chaps and a cowboy hat and way too much fringe. Jensen elects to not comment.

By nine o'clock Two Brothers is crowded with Halloween revelers and drinkers in costume. Tom showed up for his shift in a Green Lantern t-shirt, explaining that Mike wanted him to be Superman but he refused to wear the cape. Alona is wearing a powder-blue short-sleeve dress with a white apron over it and a black headband in her hair. Jensen doesn't recognize her outfit at all.

"I'm Alice!" she explains. "You know, from *Alice in Wonderland*?" She pulls a little bottle with a handwritten label out of the pocket of her apron and shows it to Jensen. The bottle is filled with something purple and the label says "Drink me" in spidery script. Alona grins.

"What's in it?" Jensen asks.

"Water and food coloring. I melted some wax around the cork so it wouldn't leak." She puts the bottle on the bar's back counter next to the register. "Don't drink it."

"Don't worry."

Danneel got the night off. Chris is in the kitchen, hygienically wearing an apron over his fringe. Jensen knows from past years that Halloween is busy. The bar tries to encourage a crowd by having a locally popular band, but tonight seems especially nuts.

He's carrying a double handful of drinks to a table when someone slams into him, causing him to spill everything, mostly on himself.

"God damn - " is as far as he gets before the person apologizes over her shoulder and vanishes into the crowd. "Shit."

He hustles back behind the bar, drops off the mostly-empty glasses, fills new ones, tries to deliver them a second time.

"What happened to you?" Alona asks, when he gets back from his second attempt to serve drinks.

"Fucking crowds," Jensen huffs. "I know I shouldn't complain. I gotta go change." He looks up and down the bar. "Where's Tom?"

"I don't know. I'm coming!" she calls to the crowd pushed against the counter. "Hold your caterpillars!"

"Be right back." Jensen pats her on the shoulder and heads towards the office, where they keep a couple of clean shirts, just in case.

Tom is standing just outside the office, practically yelling into his phone.

"You don't have to buy everyone a drink if you hog the stone in the last end," he's saying. "That's not an official rule. Someone's yanking your chain."

"Tom," Jensen says, pointing back towards the bar. "The place is really busy."

"I gotta go," Tom tells whoever is on the other end of the phone. "It's really – what? I can't. I'm here until late." He shrugs apologetically at Jensen. "Tell her to take a cab. Or you go get her. She's not – Mike. Stop. Jensen's giving me the stink-eye. I have to get back to work." He swipes at his phone and puts it in his pocket. "Sorry about that," he tells Jensen. "Carpooling problems."

"Bar problems," Jensen answers. "Alona's swamped."

Tom heads back to the front of the bar and Jensen goes into the office. The desk is covered with paperwork and bourbon tasting notes and receipts and invoices and an empty paper coffeecup and winter menus and for some reason an old copy of *The Village Voice*. Jensen takes off the vest and pulls his wet shirt over his head, drops it on the couch, and puts on a spare. He shoots a glance at the stack of receipts

and invoices that need to be organized and clipped together, but he just gave Tom a hard time for being back here rather than behind the bar. So he leaves the mess, locks the door behind him, and returns to the crush of drinkers and dancers and Halloween revelers in costume.



Across the river, in the Village, Jared is playing spooky music in his store. He propped open the door to broadcast outside, to entice any Halloween revelers who happen to be wandering by. He even has a plastic pumpkin full of candy on the counter as extra incentive. He took Sadie to the dog parade over the weekend, so he's already had a chance to test out the Leia hair buns. People seem to be enjoying them, if the number of folks asking to take her picture is any indication. He makes a mental note to poke around online tomorrow to see if she made it into any blogs or neighborhood Instagram accounts.

Genevieve has the night off but Osric is here, having volunteered to work some lateish hours before he and his girlfriend march in the parade. He's wearing a shiny blue dress that looks like it was made out of snake scales – if snakes came in that color – brown boots, and a long blonde wig. There's a little plush dragon pinned to his shoulder. When he came to work and Jared didn't recognize him, he looked offended.

"Daenerys Targaryen!" he huffed, affronted. "Daenerys Stormborn! The Khaleesi! The Mother of Dragons! The Breaker of Chains!" He sighed. "You said we should come as literary figures."

"I'm not a literary figure," Jared admitted, although if you count the *Star Wars* tie-in novels, he probably was. He hadn't actually read any of them and didn't know if Boba Fett showed up or not.

"You should see Sita. She's Khal Drogo." Osric looked pleased and Jared felt stupid. "You never read *A Game of Thrones*, did you. You don't watch it either."

"No."

Osric rolled his eyes, unpinned the dragon from his shoulder, and put it on top of the register. Jared is relieved every time someone recognizes Osric's costume, and still a little ashamed that he didn't.

Kim worked the afternoon until she had to leave to take her daughter trick-or-treating, but at least he knew who she was. Black pleated skirt, white blouse with short puffy sleeves, white knee socks, Mary Janes, bow in her hair, little plush pug, cocktail napkin from the Plaza Hotel.

A little girl came in with a teenage boy who looked like her brother, and she took one look at Kim, pointed, and shrieked "Eloise!" Kim had Jared take their picture, because the little girl was likewise dressed as the Plaza's most famous six-year-old resident.

When it was time to relieve Anton earlier that morning, AJ arrived in a surprisingly nice three-piece suit, and when Jared asked who he was supposed to be – because there are a lot of besuited literary characters

– AJ crooned "Hello, Clarice" in the creepiest voice Jared had ever heard come out of his mouth.

Now, Jared leans on the counter, helps himself to a mini Snickers from the plastic pumpkin, and tries to look out the one remaining window at the sidewalk traffic, listening with half an ear to Osric and a couple of teenage girls speculating on who's going to die in the next *Song of Ice and Fire* novel. Osric's right – he should probably read at least the first book in the series. But even the paperbacks are doorstoppers, spider-whomping volumes, and he has too many other books to read.

He comes out from behind the counter and attempts to straighten up the displays in front – the recommendations for the month are unsurprisingly all fall- and Halloween-themed books, but in a couple of days he should switch out the spooky books for more Thanksgiving-y books. He notes with satisfaction that the Lovecraft collection finally sold. It makes an empty spot on the table, though, so he starts shifting things around to cover the gap until he can fill it with something else.

"We don't know any more than you do, I promise," Osric is saying to the girls. "We can't make him write any faster."

"Yeah, but we want it now," one of the girls says. She looks Latina and is wearing a Mexican peasant skirt and fringed shawl over a green turtleneck, and from the way she's drawn a unibrow on her face, Jared's pretty sure she's supposed to be Frida Kahlo. "The show's moving faster than he is."

"Remember what Neil said," the other girl tells her friend. She has fair skin, freckles, and short hair dyed day-glo pink, and is dressed in yellow and black like a bee.

"I know, I know," Frida grumps. "George R R Martin is not my bitch. I don't care."

Jared smiles to himself, not wanting to get involved but remembering all the variations of that exchange that he's heard – and had – over the years. The perils of being a voracious reader, and then a bookstore employee, and then a bookstore owner. You want the next book now. You always want the next book now. And you can't always have the next book now.

The girls chat with Osric for another fifteen minutes before leaving. They pat Sadie on the way out. They don't buy anything, but Jared wasn't really expecting them to. He got the impression from the bits of conversation that he overheard that they just wanted to talk to someone face-to-face about books.

"It's too bad you can't march in the Village parade," Osric says to Jared.

"I know. At least I took Sadie to the dog parade on Saturday. I put the pictures of her on Facebook and Instagram. Oh, someone took your Kickstarter perk." He grins. It wasn't a small pledge.

"Yeah? That's good news. That must've been today, because I checked it last night. Sita wants the opera tickets but they're out of our reach."

It's on the tip of Jared's tongue to tell Osric that he doesn't have to donate to his own place of employment's Kickstarter, and neither does his girlfriend, but who's more invested in helping the store pay for a new window – and help keep it open and out of debt – than its own employees? Jared knows Osric's girlfriend hasn't made a pledge yet. No one's taken the opera tickets, but it's only been two weeks and he and Chad only put them up a few days ago.

A couple wanders in, a guy and a girl, probably in their twenties and dressed in regular clothes. The girl heads for the back of the store but the guy looks Jared up and down, gestures to Sadie in her white dress, and asks "Why aren't you Han?"

"Frozen in carbonite," Jared says, grinning, thinking *Han's in Brooklyn*.

The guy grins back and gives him a thumbs-up, then gives Osric the same once-over before wrinkling his forehead, apparently in thought, and saying "I know who you are. I know I know who you are. Who are you?"

Osric gets as far as "Dae - " before the guy points emphatically and exclaims "Dany Targaryen! I knew that. Good costume, man. But where are your dragons?"

"Drogon's sitting on the register," Osric says, pointing.

"Harry!" the girl calls from over by the history section. "What am I looking for? What's it called?"

"Oh, right," the guy says, trying to include both Osric and Jared in the conversation. "It's a collection of essays, like personal essays? From Holocaust survivors. They were interviewed for the Shoah Foundation? Or by the Shoah Foundation? It's called, uh, shit, my mom texted me." He gets out his phone and starts tapping and scrolling. The girl comes up to the front of the store. "*I Alone Have Escaped to Tell Thee*, that's it. A guy my grandparents knew has an essay in it. He belonged to their synagogue in Milwaukee. He was my mom's gynecologist when she was in college, and can I tell you? I never want to have a conversation like that with my *mom* ever again. Do you have it?"

"Doesn't sound familiar," Jared says, and he should know. The history section is his purview, just as Kim is the YA expert and Anton is the person to ask about art and architecture and AJ knows all about horror and suspense. He goes back behind the counter to check the system, and sure enough, they don't have it. "I can order it if you want. We deliver locally, ship non-locally, or hold it for you here."

"Yeah, that'd be cool, thanks. I'll come get it."

He gives Jared his name and phone number, and he and the girl look around for a few more minutes before taking some candy and taking off.

Osric's girlfriend comes to get him at nine and Osric asks Jared to take their picture. Jared admits that he wouldn't know who Sita was dressed as if he hadn't already been told, and she tells him not to worry about it, no one expects girls to be Khal Drogo for Halloween.

"No one really expects boys to be Dany either," she adds, patting Osric on the shoulder. He preens and fluffs his wig.

"Go have fun," Jared tells them.

"We always do."

And then he's alone, although with Sadie and the sporadic stream of evening shoppers, he doesn't feel

alone.

At ten he closes the store long enough to walk Sadie around the block, accept compliments on her costume, and take her up to the apartment. People are still coming in and out of the store, most of them dressed up. A bald guy in a long black coat and an eyepatch buys Joe Hill's *20th Century Ghosts* as an apology gift for showing up so late to his friend's Halloween party. Jared wonders how crazy Two Brothers is, and how exhausted Jensen is going to be when he finally shows up.

He checks the Kickstarter, checks the store's Facebook page, orders the collection of Holocaust survivor essays as well as a couple of things he didn't get a chance to order during the day, and texts Jensen.

Thinking about you, wanted to say hi. :)

He doesn't expect a response. He doesn't even expect Jensen to see it until after the bar closes. He just wants Jensen to know.

He looks at the plywood covering the front of his store and wishes he was a better doodler. The growing collection of doodles and random scribbling is kind of cute and reassures him that *The Moose and Mayhem* really is part of the community, but the fact that there's even something to scribble on depresses him. He can't tell this early if they'll make their funding through Kickstarter, or if he and Chad will have to take out a loan they can't afford, just so he can keep it open.

He wants the money now. He wants to replace the window before winter. He wants to know where the leak's coming from, because the floor right under the plywood is sometimes wet. He needs to get Chad out here to look at it, and then they need to call someone.

He really wants Jensen to come over. He doesn't care if all they do is sleep. He just wants someone to be there with him, to reassure him that everything will be okay.

Usually Jared doesn't mind being the only one in the store late at night and early in the morning. Customers come and go and if he waits long enough, someone will appear. But he normally has two windows to look out and no threats of closure hanging over his head.

Jeff, his favorite late-night beat cop, strolls by after one, making a pass through the neighborhood to check that everyone is behaving themselves and the parade crowd isn't causing shenanigans.

"No problems here," Jared says. "What's it like outside?"

"Not bad," Jeff admits, "considering. Had to break up a bar fight and got a domestic violence call, but nothing unusual."

"Did Hilarie take the baby trick-or-treating?"

"She took the dogs! She put a bow tie on Bandit but he kept trying to chew it off. Gus was a pumpkin. Hilarie said babies are always pumpkins for Halloween." He shrugs. "Did you make Sadie wear a costume?"

"She was Princess Leia." Jared can't help the pride that creeps into his voice, mostly because his dog let

him dress her up without any problem. He pulls out his phone and shows Jeff the pictures. Jeff looks impressed.

"Hilarie's got all the ones of Gus," he says. "I love being a dad but that kid won't let me sleep for anything. As if working the night shift wasn't bad enough." He leans on the counter. "How's the place?"

"You mean besides the plywood? Hey, did I tell you about the Kickstarter?"

"Did you? I don't remember. That's a crowd-funding thing, isn't it? Write it down." Jeff pulls a pad of paper out of his jacket pocket, flips to a blank page, and hands it across the counter to Jared. Jared scribbles as much information about the campaign as he can remember. "What do you need?"

"A new front window, for one thing, and maybe something internal, because there's a leak somewhere. Sometimes I'll come in and the floor's wet. We gotta get someone back here to take a better look at it. I hope it isn't structural."

"How's it going? The Kickstarter."

"Okay, I guess. I can't tell. It's only been two weeks. It goes for two months, so you have some time to give us some money. Is there some kind of protocol for that? It's not against NYPD regulations, is it?"

"I can always get Hilarie to donate in her name. Don't worry about it." Jeff waves a dismissive hand. "There's always a way around regs." He yawns. "I need to swing by that all-night diner and get a coffee." Jared pushes the almost-empty plastic pumpkin of Halloween candy closer to him, so at least he can have some sugar. "The neighbors are putting in a new kitchen and they start banging at nine in the morning. Gus hates it, I hate it, the dogs hate it, Hilarie tells us to just wait until we want to make renovations. I don't know where she thinks we'll get the money. Besides, the kitchen's just fine. What's this?" He peeks in the pumpkin.

"Candy. I was trying to get people to come in. I had Halloween music playing before."

"Sorry I missed it. All right, I should go. Crime waits for no man. I'll look at your Kickstarter thing. I'm sure Hilarie and I can give you something. This is a great place. You shouldn't have to close."

Jared considers adding that to the Kickstarter campaign page, or putting it on Facebook - "This is a great place. We shouldn't have to close."

The days pass and he tries not to think about it too much, but the plywood stares him in the face, forming a wall where window glass should be and reminding him that he really doesn't have the money to replace it. If he and Chad can't get a loan, he'll have to close.

He becomes more and more sure that he'll be able to keep the store. But he still feels helpless, and he doesn't know what to think or how else to feel, and he's discombobulated by the loss of a full wall of window. The store is always half dark, which is especially worse now that it's November.

"We're solar-powered," Genevieve explains, when Jared complains that he needs some sun. "People are, I mean. Have you considered a light box?"

"I just need to get out," he says. "I can't look at that any more." He gestures to the plywood. "Can I leave you here? I'll be back in a couple hours."

"You're going to see Jensen, aren't you." She tries and fails to hide a grin. Jared doesn't know why she's still so invested in his love life. He and Jensen are past the honeymoon phase. They've been together almost six months.

"Am I that transparent?"

"Call him first."

Jared rubs Sadie's ears and tells her to behave for Genevieve, and then he puts on his coat, sticks his phone in a pocket, and goes out to Brooklyn. He calls Jensen on the way, just to make sure the guy is home.

He lucks out.

"I'm processing photos from months ago, because I never had time," Jensen explains over the phone, "but I've only got about an hour and a half before I should go back to the bar."

"Can I still come over?"

"Sure. But you can't stay long."

It's not what Jared wanted, but he'll take it.

He can't stop thinking about the store the entire trip to Jensen's apartment. The Moose and Mayhem is his whole life. He tries to concentrate on the few other people on the subway and what they're reading instead.

Jensen opens the door to him and says he looks like he needs a vacation. In response, Jared just shrugs out of his coat and Jensen drapes it over a chair.

"What do you need?" he asks. "In the hour we've got."

"I don't know," Jared admits, and now that he's here, he really doesn't know. "I can't be in the store any more. I can't stand the plywood. Kim keeps buying kid-safe markers and people keep decorating it and painting it, but it's *plywood*. It's not a window. It's not the front of my store. I hate waiting for it to be fixed. I can't do anything about the Kickstarter. I don't know what I want to do. I don't know how I feel. I'm not used to – is that me?" He interrupts himself to point at the photos displayed on Jensen's computer monitor. "Why is that me?"

"Because I took some pictures of you? Remember the first time we met for brunch and you had too many Bloody Marys and I had to bring you back here to sober up?"

Jared tries to think. "That was a long time ago. We went to Two Brothers. Alona mixed the drinks really strong. I only had two."

"Three. You drank them pretty fast, as I recall. And we had to come back here because you weren't quite fit to man the bookstore. We sat on the couch."

"You sat on me on the couch." Jared thinks he might have an idea what he wants now, and why he really came here rather than, say, putting on his running shoes and going for a run in Central Park. "I had to take a nap afterwards."

"And I had to take some pictures of you while you were asleep. I thought I told you when you woke up."

"You might have. I don't remember." Jared leans over Jensen's shoulder to get a better look at them. They're black and white photos, taken from different angles, but all showing him asleep on Jensen's bed, his hair in his face, his feet bare, and the sheets wrinkled underneath him. "That was so long ago. Was it before Memorial Day? Why are you just getting around to them now?"

Jensen shrugs. "I've been really busy. Watching me process photos is going to be really boring for you." He takes Jared's hand and leads him over to the couch. "Sit. I'm sorry I don't have a lot of time, but we can talk."

"Just talk?"

Before Jensen can answer, Jared cups the back of his head, pulls his face close, and kisses him. It's intended to be a simple "I'm glad you're my boyfriend and I'm glad I'm here" kiss, but as soon as Jensen's lips open to Jared's tongue, Jared plunges right into it, claiming Jensen's mouth as definitively as he can.

They finally pull apart, breathless, and Jensen smiles. "I guess that answers that question," he says, brushing his thumb across Jared's lower lip. Jared's lips part expectantly.

It only takes a few minutes of locking lips before Jared is running his hand up Jensen's thigh to reach for his cock. He doesn't want to wait. He wants to kiss Jensen's mouth and stroke his cock and fondle his balls and tongue his nipples and hear him groan as his thighs part and Jared pushes inside him.

Jared really, really wants that.

"We should go in the bedroom," Jensen suggests, his voice sounding a little strained. Jared has managed to wedge a hand between Jensen's thighs and squeeze his cock through his jeans.

Jared doesn't want to let go, but he does, and they hustle into Jensen's room and out of their clothes.

"I didn't know what I wanted when I left the store," Jared admits, reaching down to pull Jensen's thigh up and over his hip. "I just wanted to be out. But I think I did know, I just didn't know I knew." Jensen chuckles. "Are you laughing at me?"

"Maybe." A quick kiss, then another. He grins against Jared's mouth. "Do you want to be on top? On the bottom? On the side? Should I go down on you? Do you want to go down on me?"

"I want you to shut up so I can fuck you."

But Jensen seems to have his own ideas. He rolls them over so he's sprawled on top of Jared, and he

holds Jared's head and kisses him firmly as he rubs against him. Jared grabs his ass. Jensen shifts just enough to get a hand between them, and Jared bites at his lips as Jensen closes his fingers around Jared's cock.

By now Jared is good and hard and he doesn't care what Jensen does, as long as he does it soon. Jensen obliges him by leaning over to get a condom and the lube from his nightstand drawer. He sits up, rolls the condom down Jared's stiff cock, and slick himself up.

Watching Jensen finger himself is one of the hottest things Jared has ever seen. He makes an involuntary needy little noise in the back of his throat.

"Shh," Jensen murmurs. He reaches down to touch Jared's face, then kneels astride him, reaches behind himself, and guides Jared inside his ass as he sinks down.

Jared breathes out. He was wrong – Jensen straddling him, riding him, is the hottest thing he's ever seen.

"I should've gotten my camera," Jensen says. "Photographed you like this. You have no idea how hot you are with your dick inside me."

It's such an unconscious echo of his own thoughts that Jared has to smile. Jensen leans down to brush his lips across Jared's, and then he sits back up and starts to move.

Jared rests his hands on Jensen's hips, watching Jensen's cock bounce as he rises and falls and watches Jared's face. Jensen rolls his hips and leans down to tweak Jared's nipples. He smiles almost distractedly, apparently concentrating solely on Jared and Jared's pleasure.

Jared's hands move to Jensen's ass, squeezing, encouraging, trying to push himself deeper and deeper into Jensen's body. He bites back a groan. Jensen moves faster, pushing himself off the bed and dropping back down. Jared reaches for his cock but Jensen slaps his hand away.

"You first," he pants.

"Kiss me," Jared says, breathless and hungry. Jensen leans down far enough for Jared to grab the back of his head and pull him the rest of the way. Their mouths meet in a messy clash of tongues and teeth, and now that he's sure the neighbors won't hear him, Jared lets himself moan into Jensen's mouth. Jensen wraps his arms around Jared's head, riding his cock with ever-faster motions, and Jared grabs his shoulders, his arms, his ass.

"Ahh, fuck," he pants against Jensen's lips. "Uhn... God, Jensen, I'm... I'm...."

"Come on," Jensen murmurs. "Come for me."

Jared bucks up, trying to bury himself ever deeper inside Jensen, and comes with a stifled groan. Jensen lifts his head just enough for Jared to see his face, and he watches Jared orgasm with an extremely satisfied expression.

He rides Jared through it, moving until Jared catches his breath and reaches between them for Jensen's

cock. Jensen is hard and hot and it takes very little time before he's coming as well and collapsing on Jared's chest.

"Thank you," Jared says softly in his ear. "I really, really needed that."

"It was my pleasure," Jensen says into Jared's neck. He rubs his cheek against Jared's jaw.

Jared strokes Jensen's back. His skin starts to prickle with goosebumps, now that they're finished and have managed to kick all the blankets off the bed. Jensen lifts his head, brushes his lips over Jared's mouth, and climbs off him. Jared just lies there, knowing he should take the condom off, knowing he should get dressed, and not really caring. He feels better. Calmer.

Now he thinks he knows how his customer the ad guy feels, on the nights he's so anxious he can't sleep and has to come to the bookstore to calm down. How horrible to have to feel like that as part of the normal course of your life. Maybe the guy needs someone like Jensen, someone he can go see when he doesn't know what to do with himself, someone who will be able to ground him again.

"What are you thinking?" Jensen asks, dressed again.

"A guy I know," Jared says. "He comes to the store sometimes when it's really late out and he can't sleep. He says it's just too noisy in his head. I think I know what he means. I mean, it's quiet in my brain now, thanks to you, but before, it was so *loud*." Jensen just smiles at him.

God damn, Jared thinks in his direction, *you are fucking stunning*.

"I should get dressed, huh," is what he says.

"You should."

So Jared heaves himself off the bed, pitches the condom into the toilet, and puts his clothes back on.

"I really gotta go," Jensen says, heading out of the bedroom. Jared follows reluctantly.

"You can't hang out with me for half an hour?"

"No. I told you, I have to get back to the bar. Chris can handle it for a while, but we should really both be there. I'm lucky I had the afternoon off." He sounds reluctant, but also resolute.

"I took some time to come see you." Jared can feel himself starting to pout like a five-year-old denied a cookie, and stifles the urge. He's a grown-ass adult. He should act like it.

"And I was here." Jensen sighs. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to spend some time with you."

"I don't - Look. Chris and I are still ironing out the kinks from serving dinner, never mind lunch. Shit I had to keep an eye on six months ago I still need to keep an eye on. I'm here for you as much as I can be, but I got my own business to run." He grabs Jared's coat and holds it out.

"You're a terrible boyfriend," Jared says.

"No, I'm not. I'm a busy boyfriend. I told you when you called that I didn't have a lot of time." He glances at his watch. "Come on. If you hustle I won't miss the bus. I don't want to walk and you don't want me to leave you here."

Jared drags his feet.

"Fine," Jensen huffs. He yanks his coat out of the closet by the front door and pulls it on. "I really need to go."

"Okay, okay." Jared takes his coat and follows Jensen into the hallway. All his sex-endorphin calm has dissipated, and now he's just annoyed.

"Are you *pouting*?"

"I wanted more than a quickie."

"I'm sorry. I don't want to fight." To his credit, he sounds sincere. "At least come back to the bar with me."

"Why? You'll just have your own shit to do. I'm gonna go back to the Village."

"I can call you later."

"Don't stress yourself out," Jared snaps, heading up the hill towards the Carroll Street station and the train back into the city.

Jensen calls at three-thirty that night to apologize. Jared has calmed down enough to realize he's partly at fault, but he lets Jensen do all the apologizing anyway. Maybe he could be a little less needy and a little more understanding, though.



Jensen is the first person to notice when the bookstore's Kickstarter campaign reaches its funding. He's at the bar one Sunday afternoon, in the office, nominally going through the receipts but really dicking around online, when he checks the campaign page and sees "100% funded" at the top.

"God damn," he says to the empty office. "They really did it." He does a little chair dance, already thinking ahead to the best way he and Jared might celebrate this little milestone. Then he calls The Moose and Mayhem to share the news, in case Jared hasn't seen it yet. Jensen really wants to be the bearer of this particular glad tiding, and is actually disappointed when a woman answers the phone and

says Jared's out.

"He's making deliveries," she explains. "I can take a message, or you can call his cell."

"Is this Genevieve?"

"Kim. Gen's off today. Who're you?"

"Jensen."

"Oh, hi. What's up?"

"You made your Kickstarter funding."

"We did? No shit! AJ!" she yells. "We got the window campaign! Since when?" she asks Jensen.

"I just checked ten minutes ago. You're actually forty bucks over." Jensen glances at his laptop to make sure.

"We still have almost two weeks! Do you think people will keep contributing?"

"Probably. It says any extra money you make you'll put back into the store."

"What?" Kim says to someone else, probably AJ. "It's too bad we can't drink on the job."

"Come to Red Hook for bourbon after you get off work," Jensen suggests.

"I quit drinking. But I'll have a soda. AJ will drink your bourbon. Don't tell Jared. I'll leave it up on the computer here so he'll see it when he gets back."

Jensen can practically hear Kim grinning on the other end of the phone, and then he remembers that he and Chris offered to throw a party for the local contributors. They need to start planning. Traci has already started foisting her party appetizers on them, anyway.

He tells Chris about it later that day and adds "You owe me for not putting up a fight about lunch."

"You did fight me over lunch," Chris points out.

"You won."

"I wasn't gonna argue with you about throwing Jared a party. I talked to Steve and the guys, and they'll even play for free."

"We should get him involved," Jensen says. "And the girls and Tom. We should do something fun, not just open the doors and let people in."

"We got a band. Traci's making food. What else do you want?"

"A new cocktail. Did I tell you one of Jared's employees – Osric, the little one – came by to measure a bottle of scotch so he could make a kilt for it? He did the same for the Japanese whiskey and the Gangsters' Hill."

"Why?"

"He said we could give them away as door prizes." Jensen shrugs. "He was so excited I couldn't tell him no. Don't worry, we're not giving away the Suntory Hibiki." It's a \$120 bottle of whiskey, and while Jensen might love Jared that much, Chris doesn't. "I told him he was welcome to make a little fake beard for the Widow Jane, though, for the full Brooklyn-hipster vibe."

Chris chuckles. "Cute, but we're not giving our liquor away. I'll work with Traci on the menu. You ask Alona to invent a bookstore cocktail. Just don't make it smell like paper."

Sundays are generally quiet nights at the bar, so Jensen isn't any more tired than usual when he and Chris close up and he goes across the river to see Jared. By then of course Jared has seen the news about the Kickstarter campaign and is too excited to stand still. Jensen sits behind the counter and watches him pace back and forth and around the store, chattering about the pledges that the store has to fulfill, and what he and Chad decided about the timeframe for those pledges, and when they can get someone to look at the window again, and how long it will take before the front of the store has been replaced.

All he says about the thank-god-we-made-our-funding party at the bar is "It should be before Christmas and I want everyone from the store to be able to go. It'll be the first time we've ever closed when it wasn't a holiday."

After Jensen has finally had enough and gone upstairs to go to bed, Jared calls his phone to say "Can I put up a sign that says 'We're closed for a party, come to Two Brothers in Red Hook and celebrate with us'? So if customers do show up, they know why we're closed?"

"Sure," Jensen says, half-asleep and only half paying attention. "Whatever you want."

"You know you're the best boyfriend, right?"

"Yeah. I gotta sleep."

Jared wakes him up at five, even though Jensen is only awake for two minutes before falling asleep again. But that's enough time for him to congratulate Jared, and enough time for Jared to kiss him, and that's all that counts.

In the morning they kick Sadie out of the bedroom to celebrate properly. Afterwards, they take her for a walk, and then Jensen makes Jared pancakes, and then Jensen goes back home.

The thank-you celebration three weeks later is more crowded than Jensen or Chris expected. Alona has created two new drinks for the occasion – a slightly sweet, slightly fizzy bourbon-based cocktail called the Moose, and a bright red spicy cocktail called the Mayhem. Jared's friend and business partner Chad gives the Mayhem his stamp of approval after Alona confides in him that if he clears it with Chris and Jensen first, she'll even set his on fire.

Osric has, as promised, made a kimono for the Suntory, a kilt for the pillow talk scotch, and a Kentucky Derby hat with tiny fake flowers and a tiny ribbon around its wide brim for the Gangsters' Hill bourbon. He even made a tiny plaid shirt for the Widow Jane 8 year whiskey. Jensen lines up the decorated bottles at the end of the bar with a little sign giving Osric credit for the dressing-up.

He's surprised to see half the Ginger Girls' Club until Felicia explains that one of the members lives not far from The Moose and Mayhem and organized a tiny funding drive among the girls as her contribution to the campaign.

He meets some of Jared's regulars, including Charles the jazz musician, Chris the ad man, Jeff the cop, and the Sams, Jared's late-night nurse friends. Blonde Sam has brought him a hat she knitted for him, a dark green one with "Two Brothers Bar" embroidered on it.

"So your head doesn't get cold in the winter," Jared says, grinning, as Jensen pulls it on. It's very cozy on his head. He has a winter hat already, but it's always nice to get one that someone made special just for you.

"Thank you," he tells Blonde Sam, who beams and tells him it was nothing, she knits during slow hours at the hospital.

"You didn't say the Q word," Brunette Sam says. "I'm proud of you."

"'Quiet'," Jared explains to Jensen. "It's a thing."

Jensen keeps the hat on, at Jared's request, and he feels a little silly until Jared's friend Misha the interpreter shows up wearing a knitted hat that makes it look as if a hedgehog is sitting on his head. It has brown-and-cream spikes and beady black eyes and a pointy nose. Misha's wife confides in Jensen that Misha wanted to wear the sock monkey hat but she talked him out of it because everyone has seen the sock monkey hat. But no one has seen the hedgehog hat.

There are apparently a few people who still don't know that Danneel and Genevieve are engaged, judging by the shrieks of delight that Jensen hears as he walks by a knot of people gathered around the girls. It's been months. How can people not know?

People buy drinks and scarf down Traci's bar snacks. The band gets some people to dance. Jensen and Chris are busy making sure everyone is happy and gets what they came for, but Jensen still makes time to stand next to Jared and let himself be introduced as the best boyfriend ever. Tahmoh, one of Jensen's Queens studio mates, evidently donated some money to the Kickstarter and showed up at the bar, which gives Jensen the chance to introduce Jared as the best boyfriend ever.

"You gotta bring him by and photograph him in good light," Tahmoh says to Jensen, grinning.

"You say that like I haven't done it already," Jensen answers, returning the grin. Jared just looks innocent. Jensen is pretty sure he's thinking about the during- and post-sex pictures. Jensen knows that's what he himself is thinking about, anyway. "You keep monopolizing the studio."

"Eh, I can share."

Two hours in, Jensen waves the band to a halt, gets up on stage, and takes the microphone to try and get everyone's attention.

"Thank you all for coming," he says, before realizing that this isn't his speech to make. It's Jared's. "Wait. Jared, get up here."

"He's in the bathroom," someone calls.

"So, uh, thanks for coming," Jensen repeats, feeling self-conscious. "Do you like the music? Guys, take a bow." The band does. "They'll be back for line-dancing night on Thursday."

"You should all come," Steve adds.

"If you enjoyed the Moose and the Mayhem, Alona created them especially for today. Alona, say hi." He waves in the direction of the bar, and Alona climbs up on the counter to blow everyone a kiss.

By this time Jared has reappeared, and people push him towards the stage until Jensen can hold the microphone out to him and tell him he has the floor.

"Wow, shit," Jared says, looking out at the bar full of people who wanted his bookstore to stay open. "Thanks so much. Seriously, guys, I get to keep my store because of you."

"And me!" Chad yells.

"And Chad. It was his idea to crowd-fund a new window. I can't even tell you how much this means to me. You're the best. Really, I mean it. Thank you so, so much." He just stands there, smiling to split his face, just beaming over the whole bar. Jensen takes the microphone, but before he can say anything, Jared grabs it back. "And thank Jensen and Chris for throwing this party! If you didn't know already, Jensen's the best boyfriend a guy could ask for. Not everyone would do this for me."

Jensen can feel an embarrassed blush creeping up his neck to cover his face, and ducks his head before anyone can see.

He remembers what Jared told him months and months ago, that he made it easy for Jared to want him.

You make it easy, he thinks now. It's easy to be good to you.

Jared kisses him on the cheek, much to his growing embarrassment, and people cheer. Jensen can even hear scattered applause, and he doesn't have to look at the crowd to know that Danneel and Genevieve are grinning all over themselves as if they set Jared and Jensen up, as if they sent Jensen across the river to the bookstore almost a year ago to see if the tall, friendly Texan bookseller he met at the girls' party was as cute as he remembered.

Steve takes the microphone from Jared and says "Enough with the speeches. Who wants to dance?"

The band kicks into gear and Jensen pulls Jared off the stage and away from the crowd.

"You really are the best," Jared says. "I can't tell you how much you helped me when this whole thing

was going on. I really needed someone and you were always there."

"What else was I going to do?" Jensen asked. "I mean it. I love you. Of course I was going to help. You listen to me every time I have to bitch about the bar."

"I know, but - "

"No but. I'm always going to be here for you. You should know that."

"Just wait until the contractors actually start putting the window back in." He brushes his lips across Jensen's, quick enough that anyone who might have been looking in their direction wouldn't have caught it. "I don't want to talk about it right now. I just want to celebrate. I'll show you later tonight how grateful I am."

Jensen chuckles. "Tomorrow morning. Show me in the morning."

"Jensen!" Tom yells. "One of the taps is busted! We're getting foam!"

"Shit," Jensen mutters, and Jared laughs. "Shut up. Go be with your friends and supporters. They love you too."

"Not as much as you," Jared says.

"No one loves you as much as me. Now go." He gives Jared a tiny shove and Jared kisses him again and goes off to mingle. Jensen heads over to the bar to check out the tap.

The band calls it quits about an hour later, and Jared and the rest of The Moose and Mayhem's employees go back to the Village to reopen the store. Most of the Kickstarter crowd wanders off. Chris and Jensen congratulate themselves on a party well-thrown. Traci congratulates herself on the fact that there's no party food left. Danneel stays for her shift. Regular drinkers filter in. A couple shows up for a late dinner. Business continues as usual.

After they close up, Chris gives Jensen a ride to the subway station, and Jensen sits on the train and thinks about absolutely nothing until he gets to the bookstore, where he notes someone has painted a giant red heart and "We're getting a new window! Thank you for your support!" in red letters across the plywood.

Jared is glad to see him, but Jared is always glad to see him. Jared is even pleased that Jensen is still wearing the hat that Blonde Sam made him.

And Jensen, for his part, is just glad that eleven months ago, he decided he was ready to start maybe considering looking for a boyfriend, and he was going to begin by checking out the cute guy he'd met at Danneel and Genevieve's party at his bar.

It was probably one of the smartest decisions he's ever made.



Sunday afternoon and Jared is abroad in New York, delivering book orders. Jensen doesn't have to be at the bar for brunch, so he offered to keep Jared company. So far this means that Jensen has to carry the books. He doesn't seem to mind. Jared suspects that Jensen doesn't mind being the pack mule because for once, Jared brought him breakfast in bed.

"Maybe we should move in together," Jared suggests now, as they sit on the C train heading uptown. The next delivery is a large and heavy coffee table book on Art Nouveau design, which is going to a woman on West 87th Street.

"What?" Jensen asks, distracted by something on his phone.

"Nothing." Jared doesn't really mean it. Where would they live? He needs to be close to the store and Jensen needs to be close to the bar. He asked mostly to see Jensen's reaction, and Jensen isn't even paying enough attention to give him one.

"Sorry," Jensen says. "Chris wants to change the brunch menu again and Traci is giving him a hard time."

From what Jared has managed to pick up from Jensen in the several months since the bar started offering real food, this kind of thing happens every time the seasons change. Chris is just a couple of months early, or a couple of months late.

Two girls and a guy get on the train. They're dressed for winter, except none of them is wearing pants.

"You know it was a year ago that you came to the store to say hi?" Jared asks.

"It was?"

"Yeah. It was No-Pants Day." He gestures to the three people braving the January cold in their underwear. Jensen raises an eyebrow at them. "Chad did it one year in college. I went with him to make sure he didn't get into trouble."

"You didn't go pantsless?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Jared shrugs. "I was self-conscious about my legs."

"So we've known each other a year."

"Almost exactly. Yep."

From the outside, his life looks the same. The Moose and Mayhem is still doing fine, his employees are still fun, friendly, hard-working, occasionally weird people, Chad is still Chad, Sadie still wants to make nice with every stranger who walks into the store.

But now his store has plywood over half the front, although soon that plywood will be replaced with new window glass. And more importantly, he has Jensen.

Jared wouldn't trade the last year for anything, even with the damage that happened to his store and the panic that temporarily scrambled his brain.

He surreptitiously takes Jensen's hand.

"What?" Jensen asks.

"I was just thinking."

"I thought I smelled smoke." Jared elbows him.

"Shut up. Last year was a weird year. I don't ever want to wake up and see a car sticking out of the front of my store ever again." He nudges Jensen's leg with one knee. "But I met you. And that made it okay."

"That was nice, wasn't it. Sometimes I think the smartest thing I ever did was come out here instead of going home. Hey, our stop's next."

Jared kisses him on the cheek, knowing Jensen is twitchy about that kind of PDA but unable to stop himself. No one's watching them, anyway.

They get off at 86th Street and walk three blocks to deliver the Art Nouveau book, and then they get on the 1 heading to Columbia University to drop off a short-story collection and a book on the linguistics of swearing.

"I should go back when we're done," Jensen says, after they've caught a subway going downtown. "I need to deal with Chris and his menu."

"I should probably walk my dog," Jared admits. "Do you want to sleep in your own bed tonight?"

"Yeah, I do. Is that okay?"

"Sure. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"I've got lunch duty at the bar, but the studio miraculously opened up so I can play around in the darkroom afterwards. Should be fun. I can bring you dinner."

"That'd be great." Jared pats Jensen's thigh. "If you time it right, someone else will be in the store to watch it and we can go upstairs and fool around."

"That might be nice." Jensen isn't looking at Jared, but Jared can see his pleased grin.

What a difference a year makes. This time last year, Jared wasn't even thinking about dating again, and now he has a boyfriend who will not only follow him around on delivery Sunday, but will carry the books, bring him dinner, and let himself be kissed in public.

"I love you so fucking much," Jared whispers in Jensen's ear. "You really are the best boyfriend." To his great surprise, Jensen turns and kisses him on the mouth. It's very quick, but it's enough to leave a lingering pressure on Jared's lips.

"I know," Jensen says airily, as if nothing just happened. "You are too."

"Next year we should mark our anniversary by going pantsless." Jensen rolls his eyes.

"I think we should mark it by trying something out of *Jerry Thomas' Bartenders Guide*."

The book that Jensen bought a year ago, because Jared takes his job as bookseller seriously.

By the time they're done with their deliveries, Jared is hungry and Jensen has received three annoyed texts from Traci and four from Chris.

"I need to get back to the bar to play mediator," he tells Jared in front of the bookstore. "I'll see you tomorrow." He points to a brand-new graffiti on the plywood: *J+J* inside a red heart. "Did you do that?"

"Maybe." Jared grins.

"I'm surprised it took you this long."

He points to *G+D* in a pink heart. "I did this one too. And then Osric had to add his." The *O+S* is bright blue. "Soon everyone will have a heart."

"And then you'll have to take the plywood out and replace it with a real window."

"I know! I can't wait. I'm gonna miss all the graffiti, though. I was thinking we could get window paint and decorate for Valentine's Day. Kim's looking into it."

"Sounds like a plan. I really have to go. You want anything in particular tomorrow?"

"Besides you?" Jared says it just to make Jensen blush. He really is cute when he blushes.

"Shut up," Jensen says, but he's smiling. The corners of his eyes crinkle. Jared pulls him close and kisses him, despite the few pedestrians on the sidewalk and the couple of customers who pick that moment to walk out of the bookstore. He hears a dog barking and realizes that Genevieve and Sadie are standing just inside the door, waiting for him.

"Okay," Jared says, surreptitiously squeezing Jensen's ass under his coat. Jensen swats him on the arm. "Tomorrow. Good luck with Chris."

"I'll need it. Hi Genevieve!" Jensen waves at her, rubs behind Sadie's ears, and heads down the street to the subway stop and Brooklyn.

"He's a keeper," Genevieve says, after Jensen is out of earshot.

"I know," Jared tells her. "I'm really lucky."

"He is too." She grins. Jared takes Sadie's leash and they all walk back into the store. "A woman with the fuzziest dog imaginable came in while you were gone. There were already a couple of little kids in the store and they were beside themselves with excitement. Fuzzy and Sadie sniffed each other and everyone was very well-behaved."

"Good girl," Jared says to Sadie, bending down so she can lick his face. She obliges. "I should've brought you a treat." Chris baked her a dozen dog biscuits for Christmas and promised to make more if she liked them, but so far he hasn't followed up. Jared is pretty sure the bar is keeping him too busy.

How lucky Jared is that Jensen isn't too busy to make time for him, and how lucky he is that Jensen *wants* to make time for him. Jensen is without a doubt the best thing that happened to him last year, and he can only hope that whatever happens this year, it's at least as good.

