Smiling Out of Fear

by thepinupchemist

Summary

Castiel Novak is a product of the system, having gone through too many foster homes since the age of seven. At fourteen, he lands himself in Sugar Lane Mobile Home Community under the care of Missouri Moseley. There, he meets one Dean Winchester.

A story about teenage hooligans, growing up, and finding a home.

Notes
Hey all -- I am totally posting this before I finish Pick It All Up (which has about four more chapters) and will be completing the rest of that before I post chapter two of this particular fic, but I figured since I already had this written I may as well post it. This will most likely be shorter than Pick It All Up.

This story will contain depictions of abuse, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

The title of the fic comes from Tennis Court by Lorde.

The story begins with Cas at fourteen and Dean at fifteen, but it will follow them as they grow older.
I Know It's Not Forever

Chapter Track: Tennis Court – Lorde

I Know It's Not Forever

This home is nice, Castiel supposes. It’s better than the last one, in any case, although far more crowded. He shares his part of the home with so many boys that he doesn’t know all their names yet, though he’s been here for two entire days.

He’s been labeled as high risk, so it’s not as though he has room to be picky. He doesn’t like Uriel or Raph much – as far as foster brothers go, they’re not the worst that he’s ever had, but they’re not nice, either. But they’re younger than he is than two entire years, and Castiel can’t account for most of his behavior at twelve, so he tries not to leap to judgment too quickly. Gabriel’s okay, even if he did put a fake spider in Castiel’s bed the first night that he arrived.

Missouri’s foster home is comprised of four separate mobile homes in Sugar Lane Mobile Home Community on the outskirts of Lawrence, Kansas. It’s a decently kept park, filled with rent-to-own trailers on one side and a mix of new and old mass-produced homes. Though he has yet to meet them, Zeke says the people that run the park are “decent folks” – married Bobby Singer and Ellen Harvelle. They live in one of the nicer-looking homes at the heart of the park, freshly painted, with a permanent porch ringing around it and flowers on the outside skirted by chicken wire.

Missouri’s houses are all old FEMA homes: Plain, rectangular structures decorated with homemade wreaths, bowls of potpourri and worn-out quilts draped over thrift store furniture and tacked up on off-white walls.

Castiel likes it.

When he arrived, flanked by his serious-eyed caseworker Victor, he didn’t know what to expect. He never does.

But if Castiel were to expect anything, it was not Missouri Moseley, whom insists upon being called “Mama Missouri” and won’t answer to anything else. She’s boisterous and loud and hardly cooks anything without grease. Castiel has never met anyone like her before. She’s a font of energy, always doing something with her hands – sewing, embroidering, knitting, whittling – and still home cooks every meal and asks all the foster kids if there’s anything that they need.

She gave him this angel she made out of an old piece of oak on the first day of Castiel’s stay.

“Reminds me of you,” she said to him, “You’re a little angel, I think.”

“I set someone on fire,” he deadpanned, staring at the piece of whittling in his palm, and then back up to her, bewildered.

“You sure did, honey,” she said, and a smile made folds at the corners of her brown eyes, “I wouldn’t wanna get on your bad side.”

Castiel doubted that Mama Missouri could get on anybody’s bad side, let alone his.

The oak angel now overlooks Castiel’s bed from the narrow shelf screwed into the wall above it. It’s next to his books, a small but treasured collection of creased spines and yellowed, dog-eared pages. He’s read all of them at least five times each – but it’s probably much more than that.
“How come you only have the third Harry Potter?” Gabriel asks.

Instinctively, Castiel pulls his sketchbook up to his chest, keeping his drawings safe and out of sight. He glances over at the shelf and answers honestly, “That’s the only one I had money for.”

He’s seen the other books, but never with extra dollars in the pockets of his jeans. In a Goodwill he once wanted the first one, and considered stealing it, but a sick feeling swirled in his gut at the thought of stealing a book.

He stole a t-shirt instead.

Gabriel cocks one brow at Castiel and says, “You know Mama Missouri’s got all the Harry Potters on her bookshelf, right?”

Castiel sits up straighter, “No. Where’s that?”

He’s never been in a home with books before. The Stevensons had a Bible for each of their foster children, and that was okay, but he’d had to hide the Prisoner of Azkaban from them because they didn’t approve and Harry Potter apparently advocated the Devil’s work.

“In her trailer, stupid,” Gabriel says.

Castiel fidgets, “Oh.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes and lets out a long-suffering sigh before he pulls Castiel up by the arm and says, “Come on, kiddo, I’ll show you.”

Missouri’s bookshelf lies located in the house where they all sit down to dinner each night. It’s also where Mama Missouri sleeps, and where she takes her clients – she’s a fortune teller, or tarot card reader, or something like that. Castiel just knows in includes a lot of incense, silly fabric and pomp and circumstance.

The bookshelf is the most magnificent thing he has ever seen, almost as tall as the ceiling, handmade and hand-stained, with so many books that not all of them fit. Some books sit in stacks on the carpet below. Others are stacked in front of the shelved books, and there are a few running along the window sill. He catches Gabriel studying him out of the corner of his eye, waiting for a reaction, so Castiel steps forward and takes the first book that he sees into his hands. It’s hardback whose sleeve has been torn and mended with scotch tape. The title reads The Book Thief.

“And we’re allowed to borrow them?” Castiel asks, pointedly not clutching the tome to his chest as he swings back to look at Gabriel.

“Whenever you want, sweetheart.”

Missouri stands with her hands on her round hips and a twinkle in her eye. She’s got the clothes on she wears when she takes clients, drape-y fabrics and a purple fascinator with fake peacock feathers tuck into the brim. A square-shouldered man stands a pace behind her. He looks grim.

“How many can I take at a time?” Castiel asks.

“However many you want,” Missouri says, flapping her hand at him like he’s ridiculous for asking, “Long as they come back home, I don’t mind if you take all of ‘em.”
Then Castiel really does clutch the book to his chest, and dives back to collect some more. He’ll read the whole Harry Potter series! He’ll finally get to know what happened before and what happened after and he doesn’t have to hide the books when he does it.

“I think that’s the first I’ve seen you smile, honey,” she says.

Oh. He is smiling, isn’t he? The expression slips off of his face and he feels his face flush.

“Don’t be that way,” she scolds, “You got a good smile. Wouldn’t hurt me nothin’ to see it a little more. Now you be nice to my books, you hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says quietly.

Missouri lifts one, accusatory, drawn-on eyebrow and echoes, “Ma’am?”

Castiel coughs, “I mean. Yes, Mama Missouri.”

“That’s better,” she says, a million-dollar grin splitting her face, “Now, I gotta show Mr. Winchester out, so you two behave. That goes for you, Gabriel. I got my eye on you.”

Gabriel rocks back and forth on his feet and grins right back, “No worries, Mama.”

She snorts and says, “Sure. ‘No worries,’ my left eye.”

Castiel takes so many books back to the home that he and Gabe sleep in (with Uriel, Raph, Ezekiel, Andy and a couple other boys he’s seen wandering around and whose names he doesn’t yet know) that Gabriel has to help him carry his selections.

“Christ on a cracker, kid, you really like reading,” Gabriel says.

Castiel gives a noncommittal shrug to this, but it’s true. Books are nice. Safe. There’s something about the smell of old pages that comforts him when nothing else can, when it occurs to him that he may be in a house surrounded by other boys, but he’s alone in the world without a single person to give a damn about him – except for Victor, that is. But it’s Victor’s job to give a damn about him. It isn’t real if it’s your job.

If he opens a book, he can pretend that he doesn’t share a bedroom with three other boys in a trailer park in Kansas. He can pretend that he has a family, or at least identify with the characters that don’t. Maybe he isn’t Harry Potter, but if he reads he can think he is for a little while – that instead of losing his parents and ending up a product of a broken system that he lost his parents and ended up at wizard school. It’s far more fun being an orphan if you’re a book character.

“That staring thing you’re doing is freaking me out,” Gabriel says,

“What thing?” Castiel asks, and tilts his head.

Gabriel just rolls his eyes again, an implication that Castiel has said something incredibly stupid, though Castiel doesn’t understand what that thing that could be.

“What? What did I say?” Castiel asks.

Gabriel snorts and waves him off, but there’s an odd look in his eye. Castiel has come to know that look over the years as pity, and he hates it more than almost anything else. Why should Gabriel pity him? He’s in this home just like Castiel is. They all know what that means. Gabriel is troubled, like Castiel is troubled, like anybody that ends up with Mama Missouri is troubled.
The rest of the world pities them but doesn’t lift a finger to help. The least that his foster siblings could do is spare the pity for him.

X

Though Castiel recalls little of his early childhood, he knows that his parents were nothing like James and Lily Potter.

He’s been staring at the same page in The Sorcerer’s Stone – a title he is indignant about being dumbed down for Americans – for the past few minutes. Maybe longer. Sometimes he blanks out for so long that he loses track of dozens of minutes, sometimes even as long as hours of time. He used to have a wristwatch that he wore, something a foster mother bought him at the dollar store so he’d come home on time, but one of his former foster sisters had taken it and thrown it into the yard behind that home.

Castiel never did find it.

Victor and people like him believe that Castiel shouldn’t know about his early history, which is silly, because Castiel already does know. You don’t have to remember everything about a history to recall the feel of it.

His parents were devout people whose entire lives they devoted to God’s will and the teachings of Jesus Christ. He remembers a painting above the mantelpiece in their living, a painting of Jesus with his face turned upward. There was a cross that his father made in the upstairs hallway, and he only knows that because he remembers his fingers bleeding when he helped his father make it.

But of all the things that Castiel recalls, he cannot find kindness among them. He knows foster siblings with fond memories of the families that they once had, or families that they still have and weren’t allowed to have them back. His family was not one of those. His mother slapped the backs of his knuckles when he stumbled over his Bible verses at night. His father spanked him when he was too shy to speak at the church nursery school.

The worst of it wasn’t even the day that they died. The worst memory was when he was five and his mother arrived to pick him up from AM kindergarten. He was playing with a girl in pigtails whose name he can’t remember. He doesn’t remember the game, but he remembers feeling full and happier than he ever did at home.

He was wearing a gown out of the dress-up box. It smelled kind of like peanut butter and the velcro fastenings made his back itch, but he liked the fabric. It was blue, and the scratchy tulle on the skirt glittered when it caught the fluorescent light at the right angle.

His mother was furious. She beat his bottom raw. It hurt so bad to sit on it that he cried when he did, cried at supper and got sent to his bedroom to suffer his hunger and pain alone.

And it was hunger that killed them, his parents.

“We’re fasting, Castiel,” his mother said, “And if our Heavenly Father believes it right, he’ll save us.”

He didn’t save Castiel’s mother and father, and it was the police that performed a wellness check that saved him.

Still, it’s difficult not to believe in divine intervention when both your parents starve themselves to death and you manage to live through it.
“Hey stupid, whatcha reading?”

Castiel looks up from the pages, dizzy from returning to reality. He blinks up and sees Raph hovering above him, arms folded over his chest and a haughty look on his face. He doesn’t know that much about Raphael, just that his parents are still alive and he’d do anything to book it out of Sugar Lane and reunite with them. He whimpers sometimes in his sleep, but lots of the boys do, so none of them talk about it.

“Harry Potter,” Castiel answers, but this doesn’t seem like it’s a conversation about reading material, so he calmly adds, “I understand your need for posturing. I am new and in your territory, and you feel as though you must establish your dominance. I promise that is not necessary.”

Raph responds to this by ripping the book out of Castiel’s hands.

“Hey!” Castiel shouts, and leaps to his feet, “Give that back. It’s not mine. It’s Mama Missouri’s.”

“Mama’s boy already,” Raph laughs, “Mama’s not in charge, we are. Catch, Uriel.”

Castiel watches in horror as The Sorcerer’s Stone sails through the air, pages flapping. Uriel catches the book by a handful of pages, and a ghastly riüpppppp sounds in the air.

The Sorcerer’s Stone falls into the mud beside Uriel’s untied tennis shoes. An undignified noise tears out of Castiel’s throat as he dives to retrieve it before any more damage can be done, but Uriel plucks the book from the ground and runs with a shouted, “You want the book, you gotta catch me.”

Despite the two years that he has on them, Uriel and Raph are both built bigger than Castiel is, with broader shoulders and thicker, more athletic legs. Castiel darts after them, whipping by mobile homes and trailers and other kids out playing. He’s too winded to yell at them to give the book back –

“Drop it, shitheads.”

Castiel almost reels into Uriel’s back in his haste. In front of his new foster brothers stands a kid he hasn’t seen around the neighborhood before. He looks maybe a little older than Castiel – tall, reed-thin, tan and freckled, with a deadly look in his eye.

“Eat shit, Dean, this is none of your beeswax,” Uriel says.

“Oh yeah?”

Castiel feels the blood drain out of his face. That is a gun. That is a gun in this Dean-guy’s hand, black and terrifying, and he’s aiming it right at them.

“Holy hell,” Raph says, “Dude, fuck this, we’re out of here.”

Uriel nods furiously and lets The Sorcerer’s Stone fall onto the cracked tarmac. Castiel, meanwhile, stands frozen in place, out of breath and knees wobbling from a combination of exertion and outright terror.

Dean doesn’t point the gun at Castiel, though. He stoops down and picks up the book, folding the cover gingerly over the pages, even though most of them are torn or dirty now. He holds the book out to Castiel and says, “Here’s your book.”

“You,” Castiel manages, “You have a gun.”

Dean cocks his head in surprise before he lets out a long hoot of laughter. He grins and says, “It’s a
water gun, dude,” and pulls the trigger.

A stream of water hits Castiel in the face. He sputters, “Did they know that?”

Dean shrugs, “Nah. Whatever though, those guys are dicks. Hey, are you okay?”

Castiel is wheezing and his lungs burn. At least he had the foresight to bring his Albuterol out with him, just in case. He digs his inhaler out of the pocket of his jeans and presses down, breathing in the medication. When he tucks it back into his pocket, he waits for Dean to tease him, but the kid doesn’t say anything.

So Castiel answers, “I’m fine now.”

“Never seen you ‘round here before,” Dean says, when Castiel finally takes the ruined Harry Potter book out of his hands, “You just move in or something?”

“A few days ago,” Castiel says, “Raph and Uriel are my foster brothers.”

“Cool, you’re one of Mama Missouri’s kids?”

“Does everyone call her that?” Castiel asks.

Dean makes a face, “Pretty much. I wish I lived with her. She’s fucking awesome.”

Castiel licks his lips and offers a tentative smile at this, “I do like her.” But he ruined her book. He catches his lower lip in between his teeth and goes on, “I should probably go back. I…need to…the book wasn’t mine. It was hers and I should –”

“Hey, wait,” Dean says, “I’m Dean. Winchester.”

Like the haggard Mr. Winchester Mama Missouri was with? Cas wonders.

He holds out his hand expectantly.

It takes Cas a beat to realize he’s meant to shake it. When they clasp hands, Castiel replies, “I’m Castiel.”

“I’ve never read Harry Potter,” Dean says, “S’good?”

Castiel glances down at the ruined book swaddled in his arms and says, “I-I’ve only read the third one, and a few chapters of this one. I liked them, though.”

And although he’d insisted no more than thirty seconds earlier that he had to return to Mama Missouri to bring her the book he’d desecrated, when Dean says, “You wanna come by my trailer for a soda? We only got Big K but it’s not too bad,” Castiel says yes.

On the short walk there, Castiel learns that Dean is going to be a sophomore at the local high school, and that he’s an entire year older that Castiel. He likes playing water guns with his brother but doesn’t know where the runt ran off to, has a guitar that he’s learning how to play, likes fixing cars with his dad, and has had a whole host of girlfriends since twelve years old.

“You ever had a girlfriend?” Dean asks.

No. He hasn’t really had a boyfriend, either, but boys are the ones that he likes kissing. Castiel got in trouble at the Stevensons’ house because they caught him kissing their biological son. That was worse that the whole setting-someone-on-fire thing, because they called him names and told him he
was going to go to hell. You can set a boy on fire, but God fucking forbid you kiss him.

Castiel doesn’t know if Dean thinks boys that like boys are going to hell, so he doesn’t tell him about the kisses he’s had.

He almost got a hand job, once, but it was in the locker room in his most recent school, a middle school on the western side of Kansas that he graduated from a couple months ago. The other boy was worried about getting caught, and so they stopped.

“You’re missing out,” Dean says when Castiel shakes his head, “Girls, dude. It’s like, you think you know what they all got on under their clothes but you never do. They’re all different and it’s fucking awesome.”

Castiel finds out that Dean has had his hands on three sets of naked breasts and has already lost his virginity by the time that they hike up the steps of the Winchester trailer.

“Dude, what the hell?” Dean says when they enter. The first narrow room in the trailer is a living space with an ugly couch crammed in it. There’s a boy sitting there, a boy younger than Castiel with a shaggy mop of hair, a carton of ice cream in his hands and a spoon in his mouth.

“I saw Raph and those guys,” the kid says.

“So you ran? You could kick their asses,” Dean says.

“I know, but I didn’t want to,” he replies.

Dean rolls his eyes like non-violence is the dumbest idea that he’s ever heard and says, “Whatever. Cas, this is Sam. Sam, this is Cas. He’s a new one at Mama’s.”

Sam eyes Castiel suspiciously at this and asks, “What’d you do? Mama only takes in bad kids.”

Is he a bad kid? He guesses so, if he thinks about it.

“I set a kid’s jeans on fire,” Castiel answers.

Dean goes wide eyed and sputters, “You did what?”

“It wasn’t without reason,” Castiel defends, “They found this – this stray dog, and they were hurting him. One of them was my foster brother.”

“So you set him on fire?” Dean says, brows high on his forehead.

“Well, I had to distract them somehow, didn’t I?” Castiel folds his arms over his chest, and wonders if this adventure with tall, freckly Dean Winchester is over before it even began, “When I got back from the shelter, my caseworker was there to take me.”

“That’s freaking badass,” Dean exclaims, “Sammy, he set a guy on fire!”

“Was the dog okay?” Sam asks, sticking his spoon back into the ice cream container.

“He sustained minor injuries,” Castiel answers, “But the people at the shelter told me they would have a vet take a look at him. It was a no-kill shelter, promise.”

The suspicion in Sam’s expression dims a little and he says, “That’s cool.”

“He likes Harry Potter, too, Sammy,” Dean pipes up.
“It’s not ‘Sammy’ anymore, Dean,” he snips, “I’m eleven, not a baby.”

“Yeah, whatever. Anyway, he’s only read the third one and part of the first one, but he says his favorite character is Hermione. Isn’t that the one you like? The one that’s hot in the movies?” Dean prods, and then turns to Castiel, “Sam’s just mad ’cause he didn’t get his letter to Hogwarts or whatever.”

“I wouldn’t be going to Hogwarts, Dean,” Sam says, “There’s an American wizarding school in Salem. That’s where I’d go if I were a wizard.”

Dean makes his voice gruff and vaguely British and says, “Yer a wizard, Sammy,” and jumps onto the couch, wrenching the ice cream carton out of Sam’s hands to dig his fingers into Sam’s side, tickling.

Castiel looks on but doesn’t say anything. The display makes him wish a little bit that he had siblings, but then again, maybe not. It’s probably for the best that nobody had his parents but him. That, and knowing the system, he’d probably be separated from that sibling by now anyway.

Sam is laughing and kicking at Dean, and when Dean steps back away from the couch, they’re both grinning this weird smile. A brothers-type smile. Cas pointedly stares at the carpet instead of staring at them, but only until he feels a nudge against his shoulder and sees a crookedly-grinning Dean inclining his head toward the kitchen. There, Dean offers Castiel a can of soda, which he accepts and cracks open.

When Dean asks what kind of music Castiel likes and he replies in turn that he doesn’t have much of an idea of what he likes beyond the occasional radio tune, Dean insists upon educating him, so they move with their sodas to the small bedroom that Dean and Sam share. There’s a metal-frame bunk bed crammed onto one side. Half of the walls are covered in pictures of cars and bikini-clad women, while the other half displays book posters and one of Marie Curie. Dean plays Led Zeppelin for him and with an ugly old laptop that looks like it was ejected straight from 1999 burns a mix CD, despite Castiel telling Dean that he doesn’t own anything to play the disc with.

Only when the sun sets does Castiel realize how long he’s been gone.

“Isn’t Mama gonna be worried about you?” Dean asks, after he points out the pink-and-orange streaked sky outside of the trailer.

Castiel makes a face, “Foster parents don’t worry the same as regular parents do.”

“Mama does,” Dean says, “You should probably go back. And don’t forget your book. And also tell her I said hi.”

“Okay,” Castiel says, but he doesn’t understand what the big deal is. It isn’t even dark yet.

As Castiel heads for the front door with Dean at his back, Sam pipes up from the couch, “You should come back, Cas.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “You’re pretty cool.”

Castiel actually snorts at that, but doesn’t leave Dean time to respond before he heads out. It’s still warm outside with summer heat and too much humidity – and somebody just told Castiel that he’s ‘pretty cool.’ He’s never been ‘cool’ to anybody before.

There’s sweat underneath the collar of his t-shirt by the time that he makes it back to Mama Missouri’s clutch of homes. He decides to head to her trailer first, because that’s where all the good
food is, and his stomach’s growling up a storm under his shirt.

“Castiel James Novak!” Mama Missouri exclaims when he slips in. All the other kids are eating dinner, something that smells like heaven from the stoop.

“What?” he asks.

“Where were you, boy?” she demands.

“Um,” Castiel says, “With – with Dean Winchester? He told me to tell you that he said hello.”

Missouri lets out a long, exasperated sigh and mutters, “That damn boy,” before she huffs out, “Next time you go out, I wanna know about it. We don’t just run off in this household.”

“We –” Castiel begins, and then concedes, “I, um. Okay.”

Then he places the ruined Harry Potter book on the counter and softly says, “I’m sorry I ruined it.”

Missouri snorts, “You ruined that book?”

“Well,” Castiel begins, but sees Raph eyeing him from over his dinner. Everyone knows better than to be a snitch, so he nods, “Yes. It was my fault.”

“I think you’re full of it,” she says, “Ms. Harvelle came ‘round and said she saw Raph do it. And what’d you say, Raph?”

Raph glares, hard, “I did it.”

“We don’t tolerate lying here,” she says, attention focused again on Castiel, “Raphael has generously offered his allowance to buy you a new copy of The Sorcerer’s Stone. What else was there?”

Raph looks like he wants to murder Castiel in his sleep as he says, “I’m so-rry.”

“Too damn right you are,” Missouri says, and then pats Castiel’s arm, “Now you wash up for your supper. You’re too skinny, sugar.”

Castiel obeys.

X

After supper, Castiel crawls into bed. Exhaustion hits him like a high-speed train as soon as his head lands on his pillow. He didn’t realize how different this house would be. Every foster home has rules, but Missouri has weird rules that make it seem like she actually cares about what happens to Castiel.

And who cares, anyway? She’ll drop him in a few months, he’s sure. They all do.

Except Gabriel says he’s lived here for three years, since he was thirteen. Maybe if she hasn’t tossed Gabriel out, she won’t give up on him, either.

Sugar Lane is a strange place.
If You're Troubled and Hurt

Chapter Track: Teenagers – My Chemical Romance

If You’re Troubled and Hurt

When Castiel sets aside the seventh Harry Potter book, he has a moment in which he wonders what he’s supposed to do with his time now that he’s done. He slips a sweatshirt over his cotton tee even though it’s almost ninety degrees outside – he slides his arms through the red sleeves and sticks his thumbs through the holes worn in the cuffs, feeling better swaddled in fabric. When he steps outside, he has to pull his hood up against the sun beating down. It’s high noon and the star is bright.

“Hey, Cas, catch!” he hears, a split second before a frisbee connects with the side of his head.

The culprit: one Dean Winchester.

He smiles sheepishly at Castiel and rubs the back of his neck as he says, “Heh, sorry. Can you toss it back?”

Castiel crouches down and retrieves the disc from the freshly cut grass at his feet. He aims it at Dean and throws, but to his dismay, it sails off to his right, and right into the hands of Sam, who catches it in one fluid movement and grins.

“Thanks, Cas,” he says.

Dean rolls his eyes, “Yeah, thanks, Cas. Did anyone ever teach you how to chuck a frisbee?”

Cas’ brows pinch together at that and he says, “Uh, no?” His life hasn’t exactly been trips-with-dad-to-the-park, after all. Not even close. No, all he can remember of his biological father are spankings that left him raw and instruction in prayer. No frisbees, or games of catch, or baseball games on Saturdays with hotdogs and sodas, or all of those things that Castiel has been told fathers are reputed to do.

Dean frowns at that mulling over the fact that Castiel has had no one to instruct him in the proper methods of frisbee-throwing. For a painful moment, he thinks Dean might apologize and give him one of those withering looks of pity, but instead he perks up and suggests, “How ‘bout we teach you? Me n’ Sam are real good.”

Castiel cocks his head and licks his lips before he nods, “Okay.”

Sam casts the frisbee and Dean catches it one-handed. He says, “Look, it’s all in the wrist. Hurling the thing’s not gonna do any good. Watch.” Dean flicks the frisbee toward Cas and it sails in a lovely straight line, directly into Castiel’s hands.

“Good, dude,” Dean says, “Now try throwing it back. To me. Not to Sammy.”

Castiel flips him off at that and Dean laughs. Focused on Dean, he readjusts his stance, trying to mimic the way that Dean was standing just a few moments ago. He flicks his wrist like Dean did, but instead of soaring in a straight line, the disc wobbles toward Dean like a malfunctioning UFO.

Still, Dean jumps up and catches it with a grin and says, “Better.”

The afternoon wanes away while Dean and Sam teach Castiel how to play. The heat trapped
underneath his sweatshirt becomes too much only twenty or so minutes into their game, and so Castiel peels the fabric off and folds it, setting the clothing neatly under a tree. The clothes are secondhand, he knows, but they’ll last longer if he treats them well. Besides, he likes that hoodie.

“Oh, man, I am so fucking thirsty,” Dean says.

Castiel has lost track of time. He glances down at his broken-faced watch. Almost three o’clock in the afternoon. He suggests, “You could – um, Mama has some Kool-Aid I could make us.”

Which is how they end up in Mama Missouri’s kitchen – Dean lifts himself up onto the counter while Sam politely stands with his hands folded over the frisbee in front of him. Castiel’s never made Kool-Aid before, but the instructions on the back of the packet seem simple enough. He stirs the mixture and a whole heap of sugar into a pitcher of water and ice.

That’s how Mama finds them. She places her hands on her hips when she enters the kitchen and says, “Dean Winchester, you get off my counter right now.”

Dean slides down with a smile and says, “My bad.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she says, “If I’d known we had guests, I coulda made some grub.”

Castiel licks his lips. He supposes he should have asked before he let the Winchester brothers in, but he thought since they already seemed to be acquainted with Mama Missouri that it wouldn’t…well, he should probably apologize anyway. So he says, “I’m sorry.”

“What for, sugar?” she asks, thick lips frowning at him. She’s still in her client clothes – a gold and green sari-like dress, and fake jewels studding her fingers and throat and ears like stars in the sky. Today she was doing tarot readings, Castiel thinks. He likes having a foster parent that reads cards and sees things in crystal balls better than he’s liked the strictly religious types. But maybe that’s just because the Stevensons thought he was gross for kissing their son.

He coughs into his hand and says, “Because I didn’t ask if I could bring them inside. I’m sorry.”

Missouri lifts her eyes skyward and shakes her head before she says, “Honey, these boys know they’re welcome in any a’ my houses at any old time. Don’t you apologize for making friends. I’m glad to see it. Now you park your butt down and let me finish making that drink, hm?”

The three of them hurry to obey, gathering around the kitchen table. Missouri brings them cold Kool-Aid in mismatched glasses and makes them all peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that she cuts in half lengthwise.

When they finish eating, they return outside. The frisbee becomes forgotten as Dean and Sam lead Castiel off toward the creek that runs behind the outside edge of Sugar Lane. It smells swampy and the paths worn out by many dozens of sneakers and bike tires are littered with trash, but the shade is cool and the company is good. Dean kicks a crushed Bud Light can while Sam finds a fallen branch to poke around in the mud with.

They talk about Dean’s latest conquest, a girl named Cassie that lives in the park with her mom and dad and three older brothers. Dean says he’s already kissed her and thinks he can “score big” soon. Sam tells his brother that he’d better use protection, because eleven is not old enough to be an uncle.

And at the end of the day, when the sun starts to set and Cas realizes that he should be getting home for dinner, he realizes that he had one of those idyllic summer days that he’s read about in books. He’s come back home with mosquito bumps on his arms and a nasty chigger bite on his ankle, but when he scratches them at the dinner table he can’t help a little bit of a smile.
But the summer doesn’t last. July rolls into August in a slew of frisbee games, good books, evenings spent at the creek, popsicles melting over fists and a general sense of peace that Castiel finds unsettling. He knows not to get too attached to a place for too long. Even if Gabriel insists that Mama Missouri would never send him away, he knows it’s only a matter of time. He’s been in homes that he thought would become forever homes, but turned out to be not the right fit, or whatever platitudes the parents said to him, accompanied by mixed expressions of guilt and pity.

He’s surprised when Missouri takes all the kids on an outing to the local Goodwill for new clothes for the school year. He doesn’t think he needs any new clothing, but when he sits on one of the benches near the front of the brightly-lit store, Mama frowns at him and tells him to “get.”

Castiel tries to choose clothes that are inexpensive and sturdy, things that will last. He picks a new pair of jeans without holes in the knees, and a black t-shirt with a slogan on it – whose reference he is excited to find that he understands (“Mischief managed”).

Mama Missouri frowns when he brings the things to her and instructs that he find a new pair of shoes and more than just one t-shirt.

He doesn’t like being piled into Missouri’s van after they finish, squished into the backseat between Anna and Gabriel, who are arguing about some movie that Castiel hasn’t seen.

It doesn’t end at new clothing. Mama buys them school supplies, too, even a new backpack for Castiel, who doesn’t have one. He loves his backpack. It’s dark green and has lots of pockets, and when he stuffs his school things inside it, it handles the weight “like a champ” as Dean would say.

He’s nervous about his first day of school. It isn’t because the school is a new one. He’s been the weird new kid at many schools, but this will be his first high school. Dean says that he shouldn’t worry, and that he’ll introduce Castiel to all his friends, but he worries anyway.

The night before the first day of school, Castiel can’t sleep. The other boys in his room are tucked up in their beds and ignorant of his tossing and turning and the clock reads well past midnight.

So he gets up and pads across the room, slipping out to the little kitchenette in their trailer, where he opens the fridge and pours himself a glass of milk. He hears that milk helps people sleep, though he isn’t certain of the accuracy of that statement.

It’s as he takes his first sip that he hears the front door jostle and open. Castiel stays glued to his place in the dark kitchen, and watches as Gabriel tiptoes back inside.

When Gabriel sets eyes on Cas, he shrieks.

“Jesus, Gabriel, will you be quiet,” he says.

“What are you doing up, kid?” Gabriel asks, clearly relieved that Castiel is himself and not an authority figures.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Castiel replies.

He’s always wanted to say that to somebody.

Gabriel snorts and opens the freezer, out of which he pulls a blue Otter pop and bites off the end. He says, “Been seeing Kali.”
Castiel tilts his head, “The one two trailers down from us?”

Gabriel nods, “Yeah. Her parents are kinda strict, though, so we have to be sneaky. Hindu something something.”

To be honest, Castiel knows very little about their Hindu neighbors. Kali seems not to go out much, and also seems to spend a great deal of time studying, which he can get behind. He’s gathered from his limited time in Sugar Lane that they immigrated to the States when Kali was a toddler with the age-old attitude of better lives and gold-paved roads.

“So,” Gabriel says, “Why’re you sitting all creepy-like in the dark again?”

“Can’t sleep,” Castiel supplies.

“Ohhh right. School tomorrow, huh?” he says.

Castiel nods.

“You’ll be fine,” Gabriel says with a careless shrug.

“Says you,” Castiel protests, “You’re – good at people.”

“Am I?” Gabriel cocks a brow, “Don’t get your panties in a knot about it, okay? You’re sort of cute in that mysterious-but-also-creepy kid kind of way. Chicks dig that.”

Castiel goes silent at that and studies the half-drunk glass of milk in between his hands before he coughs and asks, “Do, um. Do boys ‘dig that,’ too?”

Realization sweeps over Gabriel’s face. For a minute, Castiel wonders if he should regret telling his foster brother that he’s not sexually inclined toward women. But it proves okay when Gabriel runs his hand through his hair and says, “That makes so much sense. Man, I’m dumb. And uh, I dunno? I’ve had some bed buddies with similar equipment to yours and mine, but like, those never went past a night? I got no effin’ clue,” he finishes his ice pop and discards the wrapper in the trashcan under the sink before he claps Castiel on the shoulder and says, “Good luck.”

“Thank you?” Castiel says uncertainly.

“Anytime,” Gabriel says, “And uh? Kid, this is all between us, right?”

“Right,” Castiel nods, relieved.

“Right,” echoes Gabriel, “Cool. Anyway, I’m gonna hit the sack. Don’t bone any dudes while I’m gone.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Castiel says. He understands. Chat over. Now they’re back to pestering each other and prank wars.

Still, it’s nice to know he has somebody on his side. He doesn’t think that Gabriel’s acceptance means home or family, but it does mean something.

X

The school bus smells gross, like faux leather left too long in the heat, body odor, and cheap floral-scented perfume. When Castiel makes to sit beside a girl with her blond hair in two braids, she scrunches up her nose and sets her pastel messenger bag on the empty seat beside her. Instead, he ends up beside a bug-eyed boy that looks a little older than him and who wears a black peacoat in
spite of the late-summer heat.

“Hello,” he manages awkwardly, and hugs his heavy backpack where it sits in his lap.

The boy cocks one brow.

“Sorry,” Castiel says, “There’s…no place else to sit.”

His companion still doesn’t speak, so he settles back into the seat as the bus jostles to life, and wishes that Dean were riding the bus today.

“I’m Castiel,” he tries.

And at last, his companion speaks, his voice an accented lilt as he says, “Fergus Crowley. Please don’t speak to me.”

“Okay,” Castiel agrees.

The journey to the high school is shorter than he expected, for which he is thankful. The bus is loud and smelly and he imagines that he’ll hate it for as long as he’s stuck living here.

Smoky Bluff High School is an ugly building made out of red brick with narrow windows that make the structure look like a prison. The neatly kept outside, however, indicates that perhaps this school will not be quite as bad as some that Castiel has attended, the ones at which he was teased relentlessly and called a freak because he liked to borrow books from the school library and didn’t talk except to answer questions in class.

When he exits the bus, students shove past him and he trips, falling to his knees.

Dismayed, Castiel sees that he already has ripped new holes in the jeans that Mama Missouri bought him at Goodwill, right in the knees, like all of his other pairs.

But things are a little better once he picks himself up off of the concrete and dusts himself off. He hears an enthusiastic, “Cas! C’mere.”

He looks up and sees green eyes and freckles.

Dean.

“Hello, Dean,” he greets.

“Saw you take a spill back there, you all right?” he asks.

“Fine,” Castiel says.

“Awesome. Follow me, there’s somebody I want you to meet.”

Dean leads Castiel across the yard and into the school. Already it bustles with activity, students moving from place to place or hanging in clusters around the lobby and cafeteria. A huge line extends from the counselor’s office, presumably to deal with scheduling issues. They round the corner into the cafeteria, where a gangly girl with glasses and red hair is arguing with another girl about some television show.

“Hey guys,” Dean says, crooked grin in place, “This is Cas. He’s one of Mama’s kids. First day of high school, so, you know, be cool.”
“Hi!” the redhead brightly says, “I’m Charlie. I like your shirt. And this is Meg, who is definitely wrong about the ending to Buffy.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Meg says.

Castiel doesn’t quite know how to respond to any of this, so he just settles upon, “Nice to meet you.”

“Loosen up, dude,” Dean says, looping an arm around Castiel’s shoulders, “Meg’s kinda iffy, but Charlie’s the shit.”

Meg rolls her eyes and Charlie agrees, “This is all true. So, how’d you end up with Missouri?”

“He set a guy on fire,” Dean says, and preens, like he was the one that did the deed.

“No shit?” Meg sits up a little straighter, “That’s badass, Clarence.”

“It’s Castiel,” he mutters, fidgeting with the straps on his backpack. And then, “He was being an assbutt to a dog.”

Dean makes a face, “Assbutt?”

Castiel colors and says, “I mean. Asshole. I just. I was trying to say asshole and butthead at the same time? Uh, yes. Yeah.”

“Relax,” Dean laughs, “We got your back, dude.”

Castiel nods and swallows, and takes a seat with the rest of them. He doesn’t speak up much, just listens to Charlie and Meg bicker about Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and Dean playing mediator. When the warning bell rings, Castiel jumps and makes a hasty excuse to get to his new locker, even though he found its place after registration a couple weeks ago.

His classes are all right, standard as far as he can tell. Most of them are regular for his first day, getting passes syllabuses and told the rules of the realm. He does get shoved against the lockers by tall students that are probably seniors, who laugh like they’ve done something amazing and naughty before they jog off to their next classes.

So, yes. This is exactly like other schools. It just has a different name.

His last class of the day is a graphic design class. When he enters the room, he’s relieved to see Charlie in the far right corner. She waves to him and points to the empty plastic chair to her left. He manages a smile and takes it.

“So, how’d you and Dean hook up?” she asks, when he pushes his backpack underneath the table.

“I…come again?” he says.

Charlie smirks and replies, “Oh, not like that, you dweeb. I mean, how’d you meet? Obviously you live in his park, but I smell a good Dean Winchester story in you.”

“He threatened my foster brothers with a gun,” Castiel responds. He shakes his computer mouse to get the computer to come to life. It requires a name and password, so he sits back and assumes their teacher will give them the information when class starts.

“Nu uh,” Charlie says, “Not one from John’s arsenal?”

“Arsenal?” Castiel repeats, “No. It was a water pistol. But they didn’t know that. Whatever. They
deserved it. They desecrated a copy of The Sorcerer’s Stone.”

Charlie frowns, “Those fiends.”

“I know,” Castiel says, “Mama made Raph buy me a new copy.”

“As well she should have,” snorts Charlie, “It’s a sin to ruin somebody’s book.”

Before he can answer to her, a harried teacher rushes into the classroom with arms full of folders and the bell rings. She gives the classroom a weary smile and says, “Well! Let’s get this party started then, shall we?”

After class, Charlie walks Castiel to his locker, chattering about how he needs to watch all the Harry Potter movies that he hasn’t seen yet, and how maybe she can invite him over that weekend, perhaps with Dean as well.

“He doesn’t like my house, though,” she explains, “I like in like, the suburb-y part of town. He thinks it’s stuffy.”

Castiel has lived in plenty of suburbs before, and he’s certainly lived in more wealthy households than Mama Missouri’s. So far he likes this place best, though he refuses to acknowledge that out loud. It means he’s gotten attached, and he’s not supposed to do that with any of the places that he goes. While Castiel swaps out his books in his locker for the ones he needs for homework, Charlie continues to enthuse.

And then she says, “So what do you say?”

“Huh?” Castiel says.

“You weren’t listening to a single word, were you?” she asks, and when Castiel gives an apologetic shake of his head, she says, “I asked if you wanted to join our GSA. We meet on Thursdays starting next week.”

“GSA? Like, Gay-Straight Alliance?” he asks.

“I guess some places, yeah, but no,” Charlie says, “Last year I petitioned to have it called the Gender & Sexualities Alliance. Anyway, we do all sorts of cool stuff. Like cupcake sales and protests. Ohmygod, last year we did this really cool thing and got the school to make an anti-bullying policy that specified that discrimination based on sexual orientation is a hate crime. Isn’t that cool?”

Castiel cocks his head and says, “Yeah, but. Isn’t that a little forward-thinking for Kansas?”

Charlie makes a face at him, “Silly, this is Lawrence. We’re a college town. There’s a lot more acceptance here than other places.”

“I’ll have to ask Mama,” he finally says.

“Awesome,” Charlie says, “We need more gay dudes in the group. It’s like, me and Gilda and we got a couple trans students…”

“I, um,” Castiel manages. Because, as far as he recalls, he never told Charlie that he liked boys.

“What, are you in the closet?” she asks, and must read the look on his face, because she says, “Oh. Sorry for bugging you about it, then.”
“No, no. It’s okay. It’s just – Dean doesn’t mind that kind of thing?” he asks. He’s been too afraid to ask all summer.

“Of course not,” Charlie says, “He’s my best friend, and I’m gayer than an Easter basket. What? You were worried about it? Don’t. I have a theory that he’s bisexual anyway.”

“But he only ever talks about girls,” blurs Castiel.

“I knew it!” Charlie exclaims, and narrows her eyes at him, “You have a crush on him.”

“What?” he squeezes out.

“It’s okay,” she nods, “Your secret’s safe with me. Hey, Dean.”

Castiel jumps about a foot in the air and turns to see Dean’s goofy smile and straight, white teeth. He says, “Leave the poor dude alone, Charlie. Let me guess, she recruited you into the GSA?”

“Oh,” Castiel says, “Yes.”

“Fuckin’ vampire,” he says, and Charlie sticks her tongue out at him. Dean goes on, “She totally got me, too. Lured me in with promises of snacks. It’s cool. If you come to the meetings and stuff, we can ride back on the late bus together.”

“Okay,” Castiel says.

“You all right?” Dean asks.

Castiel studies Dean’s face – the curve of his jaw, the way his eyes crinkle a little when he smiles, the freckles that make a bridge across his nose – and he decides that no, he is definitely not ‘all right.’ Charlie’s bisexuality theory aside, Dean is very much straight. And Charlie’s right.

Castiel has a crush on him.

X

At supper that night, Mama Missouri asks them all how their first days at school went. Gabriel squawks that he already skipped two if his classes, which earns him a smack on the back of the hand with a wooden spoon and a tongue-lashing Castiel would rather never be on the receiving end of. Anna, who is also a freshman, talks about her art classes. Raph says he’s thinking about joining the boys’ cross country team at his junior high, and Uriel is quick to follow that with an agreement.

Castiel eats his pasta without speaking and listens to his foster siblings squabble and talk about their school days. He doesn’t feel as though he has much to add, unless he wants to say oh, yes, I think I’m harboring feelings for the only friend that I’ve ever had. That feels awful.

When he finishes, he asks to be excused. Missouri eyes him before she allows it.

Alone, he walks the short distance to his trailer. He showers before the rest of the boys arrive and redresses in a fresh set of pajamas. When he replaced the Harry Potter books back on the shelf in Mama Missouri’s trailer, he took a couple new books back with him, two big, thick volumes that advertise that they are the first two novels in a series entitled A Song of Ice and Fire. He thinks he’d like to start those. Gabriel says that he’s read them all, which Cas finds surprising, and in a strange way makes him want to read them more.
Only, when he makes it back to his bedroom, he’s not alone.

Dean is on his bed, flipping through the drawings in his sketchbook.

“How in heaven’s name did you get in here?” Castiel demands.

“How?” Dean says, “Oh, I climbed through the window. Mama should really look into getting that screen replaced. These are really good, dude, did you do these all yourself?”

Castiel snatches the sketchbook out of Dean’s hand and mutters, “Yes. And they’re private.”

Dean looks almost hurt when Castiel folds the cover back over the sketchbook and tucks it back between his mattress and the wall, but recovers and says, “Hey, so you wanna go to the drive-in?”

“It’s a school night,” Castiel says.

“So what?” Dean asks, “They’re showing Attack of the Puppet People and something else. You like old stuff?”

“Yeah, but – how are we supposed to get there?”

Dean shrugs, and his eyes glint with just a little mischief, “My old man’s down for the count and –” he holds up a ring of keys, “I’ve got his car.”
With a heave of his body, Dean hurls his body over the window sill and out of the home. Castiel watches him land neatly on his feet without so much as a bounce. He turns when he steadies and grins up, “You coming?”

This is a terrible idea, but it is a terrible idea that Castiel is more than happy to indulge. In spite of being dressed only in pajamas, he slips his feet into his new Goodwill tennis shoes, throws his sweatshirt over his shoulders and zips it up over his t-shirt, and leaps up onto the window ledge. He jumps down and lands without more than a soft *thump* of noise as evidence.

Dean whistles lowly and says, “Smooth as hell, man.”

Castiel cocks a brow, “This is not my first attempt at sneaking out.”

“Hell yeah, man, that’s what I like to hear,” Dean laughs softly. Before they leave, Dean carefully closes the window from the outside, nudging it quietly closed as far as it will shut. They talk and laugh quietly as they tread away from Missouri’s conglomerate of mobile homes, across the park to Dean’s trailer.

There, Dean guides them to a huge, sleek black vehicle, a classic, and certainly not the type of car that Castiel would deem it wise to joyride in to the drive-in movie theatre without a license. But they’ve come this far already, so he obediently slides into the passenger’s side of the car. The interior smells like old leather and more faintly of liquor. When Dean starts the engine, it roars to life with a purr, loud enough that Castiel is certain the entire community has heard and now knows that Dean Winchester is up to something.

They roll down the road, and as soon as they’re free from the confines of Sugar Lane, Dean plays his music. It’s the same kind of classic rock that Dean spent all summer “educating” Castiel on, playing cassettes and CDs every time that they lounged in Dean and Sam’s bedroom. This is AC/DC, he thinks, and smiles at his own knowledge.

The drive-in is about a fifteen minute drive from Sugar Lane. It’s a sketchy lot sandwiched in between storage units and one-level factory buildings. When Dean pays for their entry, the employee at the front grins and says, “Hey man, good to see you.”

“You too, dude,” Dean smiles, “Oh, hey. Chuck, this is Cas.”

Chuck waves through the window, “Hiya, Cas.”

“Hello,” Castiel manages.
“All right, you two have a ball, gotta go get the folks behind you. Nice to meet you, Cas,” Chuck laughs, and pats Dean on the shoulder through the window.

Castiel says as they slow to a halt and park, “I suppose you do this a lot?”

Dean shrugs, “Eh, enough that they know me. Most times I go alone though. Kinda nice to have company. You wanna go get snacks?”

“I don’t have any money,” Castiel says.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean replies, and brandishes the leather wallet that he paid Chuck from, “Nicked my dad’s wallet, too.”

At the concession stand, Dean buys a jumbo bucket of popcorn and a couple of bottles of soda – and then a package of Skittles when he sees Castiel eyeing them, despite Castiel’s insistence that he didn’t have to.

As promised, the first movie of the night is Attack of the Puppet People. They sit outside Dean’s father’s car on the hood instead of inside, because Dean says that he doesn’t want to bring it home smelling like cheap popcorn, or risk spilling anything in it. They stretch out with the bucket of popcorn placed strategically between them. Castiel’s grateful for this, not because of the easy access, but because if he sits too close to Dean, he can smell his soap. Even with popcorn between them and the scent of cigarette smoke on the air, the aroma comes through. Cheap soap. Ivory. It’s the kind of soap that Castiel uses, too, the kind that comes in jumbo packs at Costco.

“So how come I can’t see your drawings?” asks Dean.

Castiel glances over sharply at this and frowns. He says, “I told you. They’re private.”

“Yeah, okay, jackass. Why are they private?” he asks, and then adds more softly, “They were nice, dude.”

Most of Castiel’s drawings have religious themes. Maybe it’s due to the bullshit that is his dead parents’ legacy. Maybe it’s because he’s named after an angel. Maybe it’s because he’s been through a dozen God-fearing, bible-thumping foster homes. He doesn’t know.

Maybe it’s just because he likes drawing bloodied-up angels and crucifixions.

It’s probably a combination of all of those.

“Nice’ probably isn’t the term I’d choose,” Castiel says carefully.

“Not the point, Cas,” Dean says, “I mean – they were good. Like, really fucking good. How come you never told me you draw like that?”

“Because,” Castiel replies, petulant.

Dean makes a face at this. He takes a handful of popcorn from the container between them and chews thoughtfully on these. Food still in mouth, he says, “You’re a pain in the ass sometimes.”

“That is what she said,” Cas snips back.

Dean spits half-chewed popcorn across the drive-in lot and sputters out laughter. It’s a choked, jolly sound. He slaps his knee through his jeans and wheezes, “Jesus Christ, Cas. Didn’t know you had it in you. Hey, speaking of ‘she,’ though, you meet any cuties in your classes? Blue eyes like yours, I
bet they’re all over that shit.”

Castiel fidgets, and thinks of what Charlie said, that Dean is open and accepting of her sexuality. He is also a member of the GSA – though he says that was for the snacks.

“Hey,” Dean says, “You all right? Was it something I said?”

“If there was someone ‘all over that shit,’” Cas starts, each word cautious and quiet, “then I wouldn’t want it to be a ‘she.’”

Dean cocks his head and then snorts, as if to say, ‘of course.’ Then his easy smile reappears on his lips and he says, “Man, I had all these girls in mind for you, too. Far as I know there ain’t much guy on guy at Smoky Bluff. Bet you could find some dudes at the mall, though. Maybe I can get Charlie’s mom to take us sometime.”

“Dean, are you playing matchmaker?” Castiel asks.

“Shut up,” Dean says, and shoves at him a little.

They don’t speak much after that, but the conversation still leaves Castiel warm. He watches the movie in silence, sucking on Skittles.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t attached to Dean, but he knows that he shouldn’t get attached. He’s already been at Mama Missouri’s place for a couple of months now, and he doesn’t know how much longer this home will last before he screws up and gets sent someplace else. That’s why he doesn’t want to go to the mall, or join the GSA, or any of the things he would do if he had a normal family. He’s supposed to be detached, supposed to be resigned to the impermanence of the situation he’s in for four more years, when he can find a place of his own and finally have a home.

He daydreams about that a lot. Probably too much. He doesn’t require much. Castiel would be overjoyed to have a tiny, shitty studio apartment, as long as it was his. Maybe he could even find a place to rent that allows pets, and adopt a dog – a dog from a shelter, preferably one just as misfit and used to impermanence as Castiel is. They’d be a two-unit family.

Yeah, that would good.

But it’s a pipe dream.

When the movie ends, Castiel and Dean drive silently back to Sugar Lane. It isn’t an awkward quiet, but a comfortable one, sprinkled with the sounds of a Led Zeppelin cassette being played on low volume and late night traffic. Dean drops Cas off at the edge of the park so that he can sneak back into his bedroom without a loud car beside him.

“G’night, Cas,” he says, that easy grin fitted on his face, “See you at school.”

“Goodnight,” Castiel replies.

He waits until Dean’s car (an Impala, he has been informed) drives away to walk back to Missouri’s. He keeps the hood of his dark red sweatshirt up over his head and his hands tucked into the front pockets. He opens the window to his bedroom the same way that Dean closed it and wriggles up, landing inside.

None of his foster brothers are asleep. They all look at him expectantly, and Gabriel asks, “Where the fuck were you?”
“I went to the drive-in with Dean,” he says, “What?”

“You get some?” Gabriel questions.

“Get some what?” Castiel echoes.

“Sex, idiot,” he clarifies.

Castiel colors. He shakes his head and says, “It’s not like that,” he spares a glance at the other guys, “A-And I don’t like boys like that, Gabriel.”

At Castiel’s stammer, Gabriel’s gaze softens – or maybe it’s a trick of the dim light. He waves Castiel off and says, “Whatever, you –” before they’re interrupted by a distant shout.

Andy, from his place in the lower bunk across from Castiel’s, pulls his pillow over his ears and complains into his mattress, “Oh, not this shit again.”

“What shit?” Castiel asks. There’s the shout again, louder this time, a gruff and furious bass. Another yell responds, a familiar sounding yell. Castiel’s brow crinkles and he glances toward the window, still ajar from his leap back inside. He asks them, “Is that Dean?”

Gabriel blows all the air out of his lungs and stretches back on his bed, “Yeah. Surprised you haven’t heard one of their fights yet.”

“What’s?”

“The Winchesters,” Gabriel answers, “At each other’s throats. It’s funny, except when it’s not.”

“Five bucks on Dean walking out,” Andy says.

“I’ll take that bet,” Gabriel responds, “They’re not hollering loud enough for him to run crying to Bobby’s.”

They ring around the open window like an argument between Winchesters is a spectator sport. Castiel knows that Dean has mixed feelings about his father, but not because he’s ever told him that. He knows, rather, from the lack of information. He can infer from John’s distinct absence whenever Dean invites Castiel back to their trailer that Dean doesn’t care for him to encounter John.

Castiel has only ever seen the man once, right after he moved in here – and that was with Mama Missouri at one of her sessions, not in the Winchester trailer.

The shouts are too far away to decipher the content, but they grow in volume as they continue. At last there’s the echo of a door slamming, and from across the park Castiel can see the figure of Dean, backlight by his porch light. A bigger silhouette follows – and then a final snap:

Dean’s voice yells, “Go fuck yourself!” before his shadow stalks in the direction of the Singer-Harvelle mobile home.

“You owe me five, sucker,” Andy says.

Gabriel sighs, and with a rustle retrieves his things, slapping a worn out five-dollar bill into Andy’s outstretched palm.

Castiel turns back and keeps leaning out the window, even as his foster brothers shuffle to their beds and ready themselves for sleep. John Winchester lingers in the front doorway of his trailer, watching the way that his son left.
After a long second, he closes the door, and disappears.

X

At school the next day, Dean has a black eye.

When Castiel cocks his head and opens his mouth to ask if he is okay, Dean holds up his hand and says, “Don’t. Just – don’t.”

X

He and Dean don’t see each other much outside of school in the next week. Castiel gets caught up in the flurry of starting school, and the eternal debate over whether or not he should actually do his homework or let it rot, no matter how simple the assignment may be.

Mainly he finds that he ignores his assignments, and instead opts to read. He’s halfway into the second book in the *A Song of Ice and Fire* series, *A Clash of Kings*. He also sketches when he can get away with it, only drawing in the rare moments of privacy he can be afforded with living in a bedroom that he shares with three others.

It isn’t until a Saturday two weeks later that Dean lands on the stoop of Castiel’s home, with his younger brother in tow.

“You wanna come to the creek with me n’ Sam?” he asks. His black eye has mostly faded, although bare, yellowish remnants linger just along his cheekbone.

“Let me get my shoes,” is all that Castiel has to say.

They don’t talk about Dean’s black eye or his arguments with John – there have been two more since the first that Castiel witnessed. In fact, they don’t talk at all, until halfway to the creek, Sam pipes up, “Dean can play Hey Jude on his guitar now.”

“Sam,” Dean says, a warning.

“I’d love to hear it sometime,” Castiel replies.

Dean’s lips quirk up crookedly and he says, “Only if you let me see your drawings.”

“That’s blackmail,” Castiel protests.

“Whatever, dude, it is not,” Dean says.

Sam pipes up, “You like to draw, Cas?”

“Um,” Cas says, and decides that while he can be rude to Dean all he pleases, he couldn’t do the same to Sam. So he nods, “Yes, I do.”

Sam grins, “Cool! Could you draw me?”

Castiel smiles, “Maybe. I don’t have my sketchbook with me.”

“I didn’t mean right now,” Sam says.

“Eh, quit buggin’ him, Sammy,” Dean says, and ropes his brother in to ruffle his mop of hair.

Sam shoves at Dean and insists, “It’s Sam, stupid.”
In one of the clearings by the creek, they find an old, mud-caked shopping cart. Sam asks if they can make a fort out of it. Castiel watches Dean have a ‘no’ on the tip of his tongue, but his face changes and he says instead, “Sure, but the cart’s not big enough for a fort on its own, dude.”

“I know that,” Sam says, “I’m not dumb, jerk.”

“If you say so, bitch,” Dean shoots back, and Sam scowls.

Most of the legwork is completed by Dean. He drags the defunct shopping cart to a different spot in the clearing and uses some of the surrounding, swampy brush to make a little cove. Sam suggests paving the way to their fort with flattened cans, and so he and Castiel go hunting for materials. They return with some broken boards as well as dirty cans to crush into makeshift paving stones.

The end result is a lean-to-like structure made of broken pieces of wood, sticks and the shopping cart. Crushed cans of PBR and Sprite lead the way into the opening.

Sam beams.

And when Dean looks at Sam so happy and pleased with their work, he smiles too. A knot forms in Castiel’s throat. It stops him from saying something stupid – like I wish I had a brother. Mostly he just wishes that he had somebody to love him as much as Sam loves Dean and Dean loves Sam. But whatever – if he had a sibling they’d probably have been separated by now, anyway. His aloneness is for the better.

They spend the better part of an hour cramped inside the little fort, talking about nothing in particular. And when Sam falls asleep with his head flopped over on Castiel’s thigh, they know that it’s time to call it a night.

Castiel walks the Winchester back to their trailer, but when Sam runs inside, Dean lingers. He says, “You wanna hang out again tonight? Just you and me. We can meet up at the fort.”

As if Castiel could refuse an offer like that.

“Sure,” he says.

Dean’s eyes crinkle at the corners and he gives Castiel a soft sock in the shoulder, “Awesome. See you tonight, dude.”

Dean is already inside his trailer before Castiel can reply.

“See you tonight,” he still says, to no one in particular.

X

After supper and the sunset, Castiel loiters in his bedroom. Andy and Zeke are on dish duty back in Mama’s home, but Gabriel’s holed up in the bedroom with him. And Castiel wants him to leave, leave so that he can sneak out and meet Dean like he’s supposed to.

But then, Castiel’s caught Gabriel going to and coming from Kali’s more than a few times now.

“Gabriel?” he finally ventures.

“Mm.”

“Will you tattle if sneak out to see Dean?”
Gabriel turns his head and arches a brow. He asks, “Really, kiddo? I may be many things, but a
snitch is not among them. Have a blast. And use a condom.”

“Ha fucking ha,” Castiel says. He makes for the window, but at the last moment hesitates and draws
back. Instead of just going with nothing but the clothes on his back, he reaches for his sketchbook
and decides to take that, too.

“Make good choices!” Gabriel says behind him, when Castiel climbs up onto the window sill. He
brandishes his middle finger in response to this, and then drops down outside the home, a perfect
landing.

At the fort, Castiel finds Dean already waiting. He’s standing in the middle of the clearing with a
fabric guitar case slung over his back and a six pack of beer in one hand. When he hears Castiel
crunching through the brush behind him, he turns and grins.

“Thought you were bailing on me,” he says.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Castiel replies honestly, “I had to wait to get out.”

“Mama probably knows you’re sneaking around anyway,” Dean says with a careless lift of his
shoulders.

“Why, because she’s a psychic?” asks Castiel.

Dean rolls his eyes, “No, idiot. ‘Cause she’s smart.” He shrugs the guitar off of his back and holds it
close to him before he ducks first inside their fort. With the guitar, Dean, Castiel and the sketchbook
it’s a tight fit, but not small enough to be uncomfortable.

Dean pulls a can of beer from the plastic confinement and cracks it open, chugging back a long,
thirsty drink. He sighs when he sets the can aside, and lifts the remaining five with a, “You want?”

“Sure,” Castiel says, and takes a can. He’s had beer a few times before, and in general finds it to be
an okay beverage. He used to steal beers from one of his foster fathers when he was angry at him –
at first he only hid the cans, but they started to gather, and so Castiel started to drink them. And once
he went with his older foster sibling to a high school party when he was thirteen. He drank too much
beer that night, and threw up on a girl in a blue tank top.

The sound of the guitar case being unzipped fills the quiet between them as Castiel nurses his beer.
Dean extracts the guitar. It’s a worn out thing, scuffed, and one of the strings is broken. But from
Dean’s tender touches, it’s clear that he adores the instrument all the same. He feels around the
pocket of his jeans and pulls out a pick.

Castiel watches intently as Dean tunes, and when Dean says the words, “All right, here goes,” he
just nods and listens.

Dean’s singing voice is even better than Castiel imagined, low and husky and sweet as he lets out the
words to Hey Jude. His playing is clumsy, but much better than Castiel could do – so naturally, he’s
impressed. He doesn’t glance away even once during the entire song.

When Dean finishes singing, the look on his face is open and raw. He coughs and asks, “Uh…was
that – how was that?”

“It was wonderful,” Castiel assures him. After a few beats of silence, they both reach for their beer
cans and sip. It’s cheap stuff, bitter and lukewarm, but Castiel is grateful to have something to do
with his hands, anyway.
“Hey, so,” Dean starts, and pats the inside pocket of his jacket, a too-large, secondhand leather thing. He pulls out a baggie and waves it, “You want some? I bought it off my tattoo guy.”

“You have tattoos?” Castiel asks, and then, “Wait, is that a bag of weed?”

Dean smiles, “Maybe.”

Now that, Castiel has not tried.

And he’s never been known to say no to trying anything at least once, so he says, “Okay.”

Thick, calloused fingers roll paper into a little twist that Dean lights at the end with a fancy zippo. It has a woman in a red bikini emblazoned across it. The smell of the smoke is acrid, almost like skunk spray, but the dazed, silly look on Dean’s face is worth it. He exhales through his nostrils and passes the joint to Castiel, who inhales.

It burns his throat worse that whiskey, makes it feel dry and scratchy, and he ends up having a coughing fit that he tries to douse with crappy beer. Dean chuckles at him and says, “Newbie, huh?”

“I’m only fourteen, Dean,” Castiel reminds him, "I've had a limited amount of time to experience new things."

“Huh,” Dean says, “When’s your birthday?”

“December twenty fourth,” Castiel replies.

“Christmas Eve?” Dean says, and cocks his head.

Cas nods.

“Cool. Mine’s January. Legit exactly a month later,” he says. He exhales more smoke and then points to the sketchbook laid carefully to Castiel’s right side, “Can I take a look now?”

Castiel nods again, and folds back the cover to the first drawing – a horned demon, intricately detailed with blood and jewelry, gored in places, and hung on a cross. Dean takes the spiral-bound book and sets in his lap. He stares. He stares for a long, long time.

And then he finally says, “This is fucking badass.”

“Thank you,” Cas says, and tries not to preen.

Dean flips through the pages, over equally gory and gross drawings – ripped out wings, blown-out churches, sharp-toothed creatures with yellow eyes. He hovers his fingers over each like he’s going to touch, but never does. When he reaches the blank pages in the back, he passes the sketchbook back and says, “Dang, Cas. That’s some cool shit. Is it – a lot of it looks kinda like. Religious. I dunno.”

“It is, sort of,” Castiel replies. Mostly they’re blasphemous. They’re also what populate his nightmares.

“Do you believe in God?” Dean asks.

Castiel considers this and says, “I don’t know. Sometimes I think about it, but then I just think of my parents.”

“What, like your parents-parents?” Dean queries.
“Yes,” Castiel answers, “They fasted themselves to death and believed that God would save them.”

Dean sits up straighter. He studies Castiel’s face, perhaps looking for a sign that he’s joking. When all that Castiel does is stare back, Dean says, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Castiel just says, “Tragically, no. I am not fucking kidding you.”

“Shit, man,” Dean says, “That’s like ten kinds a’ messed up.”

“Maybe it was God,” Castiel says after a stretch, “They weren’t nice people. I mean, I don’t remember a whole lot about them anymore, but the things that I do remember are usually awful. The system is bullshit, but I’ve probably been better off going place to place than I would have been living forever with my parents.”

“So you don’t, like…wish they were alive?” Dean asks.

Castiel shakes his head, “Not really,” and with a sad smile he adds, “Besides, if they didn’t kill themselves, I might not have ever met you.”

It’s a stupid thing to say, he realizes, sentimental and silly. But Dean doesn’t scoff or make fun of him for saying it. Instead, he just smiles that lazy smile, slack and dizzy from his high and says, “Yeah. Guess it would suck pretty hard if you never moved in.”

He doesn’t even realize that he’s smiling back until Dean reaches out and touches the tips of his fingers to Cas’ lips. When Dean’s hand drops, Castiel’s smile fades, and he asks, “Are we friends?”

Dean looks at him like he’s grown a second head.

“Uh, Cas,” he says, “Fucking duh.”

“Sorry. I just – I just don’t really have friends,” Cas says, “I mean. Not that I don’t want them. I’m sorry. I’m really bad at people. God, I’m so fucking awkward.” He puts his face in his hands.

“Whoa, whoa,” Dean says, “Chill, dude. Yeah, you’re a little awkward. So what? We’ve all got problems. Charlie never stops talking, Sam’s a suck-up, I can’t keep it in my pants – you get the idea. You also fuckin’ kick ass at drawing. And you set a dude on fire to save a dog. I’m pretty sure you’re good. So yeah, we’re friends.”

A wobbly smile splits Castiel’s face.

He murmurs, “I’m glad we’re friends, Dean.”

Dean pats Cas’ forearm, takes a sip of beer and says, “Me too, buddy.”
Just Where I Wanted to Be

Chapter Track: Come Lie Down With Me (And Sing My Song) – Elf Power

Just Where I Wanted to Be

Castiel wakes puddled in sweat, back aching, and surrounded by the smells of earth, beer, and masculine body wash. For a moment, he’s back at an in-between group home, tucked into bed with another foster kid – except that they never smelled this nice, instead reeking of microwave dinners and despair. He hums and wriggles in closer to the warmth around him.

The warmth shifts, a mess of gangly limbs and soft, worn clothing.

Oh.

Oh, Jesus.

Castiel’s eyes snap open. He has his arms octopussed around one Dean Winchester, whose green eyes are open and a boyish smile on his face. When their gazes cross, Dean says, “Mornin’ sleepyhead.”

Cas jerks himself away, scooting a foot from Dean’s body before he feels safe to breathe. He doesn’t have morning wood, so that’s at least one point in his favor. He stammers, “S-Sorry. I’m, uh –”

“A cuddler?” suggests Dean.

“Yes. That,” he says, “I tend to drift in my – wait, what time is it?” He glances down at his wristwatch – just past seven o’clock in the morning. At least it’s a Sunday. He collapses onto his back on the ground, knowing that he’s getting dirt in his hair and not really giving much of a damn. He snuck out and fell asleep. With Dean. And someplace within the duration of that sleep, he managed to wrap himself around Dean like a hungry boa constrictor.

And Dean appears to be utterly unperturbed by it all.

Dean stretches, still on his back in the dirt and says, “Damn. Slept like a rock. Ugh, my ass hurts, though.”

Castiel snorts at this and Dean smacks his upper arm with a chuckle, “Not like that, jackass.”

Dean finally heaves himself up and rubs both his hands through his hair. It doesn’t do much to help – the mass of golden-brown sticks out in almost every direction, especially at the front of his cranium, right where his face was pressed right into Castiel’s chest. He yawns and says, “So you were saying?”

“Come again?”

“You tend to drift something something,” he iterates.

“Mm,” Castiel says, “I drift toward others in my sleep. I once had some hippie hack therapist that said something about a lack of affection blah blah blah need for human contact blah blah blah. Anyway, sorry, I can’t control it.”

Dean crinkles his nose and drinks Castiel in with a studious look before he huffs and says, “Dude, no
worries. Sammy’s a cuddler too. But uh, don’t tell him I told you that. He wants you to think that he’s cool. Wait, don’t tell him that either.”

Castiel laughs. He promises, “I won’t.”

Although Castiel wants to stay here in their tiny little fort, he knows that he can’t. He has to return home or Mama will kill him – which is a funny thing to think. Nobody’s cared about what time he comes home before. No one’s cared if he ran away or left for good, because in too many eyes he’s an easy paycheck and a way to milk money out of the government. He’s not somebody’s child, and nobody would be upset about him if he didn’t come back.

At least until now. He isn’t certain whether he should be angry or scared or grateful, so he decides to be all three.

He helps Dean clean up their mess, gingerly handling the guitar while Dean “finds someplace to stash the booze.” He returns without the remaining cans and a grin on his face that Castiel can’t help but smile back to. They trek back into Sugar Lane together, side by side and close enough that their shoulders bump.

Outside the park’s main office, Bobby Singer pushes a lawn mower. As soon as he sees them he switches it off and says, “Dagnabbit, y’idjits.”

“What?” Castiel says.

Dean, at the same time, waves Bobby off and says, “Whatever.”

Castiel has only before met Bobby in passing. He doesn’t come to Mama Missouri for card or palm readings, but he does sometimes come around for her ‘famous fruit punch’ and a good conversation. When Missouri has guests over Castiel tends to keep to himself, ensconcing himself in his bedroom in the other trailer and shoving his nose in a book so it doesn’t look like he’s avoiding human contact. As far as he’s seen in the moments before he makes himself scarce or sneaks into Missouri’s home for a discreet snack, Bobby’s a reliable, decent sort of man.

Which is probably why it’s so terrifying to be on the receiving end of a monster of a glare on the man, and then a stern, “You. You get back to Missouri and you do it now. You worried her sick, you idjit.”

“Okay,” Castiel says, because he doesn’t think that he’s getting out of this without a concession.

“Good boy,” Bobby approves, “And you,” – he rounds on Dean – “you get inside. Ellen’s makin’ bacon n’ eggs. And wipe your feet, you hooligan. Castiel, you scram.”

Dean smiles at Castiel and salutes before they part ways. As soon as Dean treks to the mobile home beside the office and vanishes inside, Castiel starts walking toward Mama’s homes. Only then does he realize that he’s covered in dirt, and makes sure to wipe the bottoms of his sneakers off on the welcome mat before he quietly slips into Mama’s home for breakfast.

“Castiel!”

Before he can open his mouth to speak, he’s hit by a wave of herbal, earthy perfume and gathered into warm arms. Missouri hugs him so hard he can feel the embrace in his spine. Only, when she releases him, she’s scowling something fierce. She declares, “You’re filthy.”

“Yeah,” he concedes, because there’s really no denying that.
“And you reek like ganja,” she says, and folds her arms over her chest. She studies him with a hitch between her brows, and Castiel thinks he’s about to get the lecture of a lifetime or maybe a smack, but instead she asks, “Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?” she repeats.

“…Fine,” he says, “I was just out with a friend. We fell asleep.”

“Let me guess, your friend is little ol’ Dean Winchester,” she says.

Missouri could make it so that he couldn’t see Dean again outside of school. He’s never had that happen to him before, but he has had parents of children he was almost-friends with herd their offspring away from him, because he’s a bad influence. Castiel doesn’t think Dean is a bad influence but it could certainly be interpreted that way, considering he snuck out, didn’t come back until morning, and when he did return he was covered in dirt and smelling of marijuana.

But Dean is his friend. He said so. And Castiel is not going to let go of a friend. Even if Mama Missouri tells him he can’t see Dean anymore he’ll sneak out. He doesn’t want to count his chickens before they hatch, though, so he decides to first plead his case: “Yes. I was with Dean. But…please don’t make me stop hanging out with him. He’s – he’s not a bad person, honest,” and then more softly, “He’s my friend.”

The look on Mama Missouri’s face is unreadable.

Then, she scoops him into a hug.

“Oh, you stupid boy,” she says when she lets him go, “I’m not worried about you hangin’ around Dean. He’s a good kid even if he makes trouble sometimes.”

“Thank you,” Castiel says, and looks down at the floor.

“No, you don’t,” she says, and places a manicured hand under his chin, lifting his head so he meets her brown eyes, “You look at me, okay? I think it’s good you got a friend. But I am furious that you been sneakin’ out and that you decided not to come home. What if something happened to you, Castiel?”

“You wouldn’t get money out of me, I suppose,” he says, and immediately regrets it.

Missouri’s face goes from worried to wounded in an instant. She shakes her head back and forth and says, “Child, if you think I do this for the money you must be crazy. Ain’t no amount of money you could pay me to take in Gabriel, for one.”

“Then why?” Castiel asks.

“Sugar, reason I do what I do is because you kids seen more shit than most adults see in their whole lives. Because you don’t meet my eyes when I speak to you. Because you think that when I worry about you I’m really worryin’ over money. I’m gonna tell you something about Gabe when he first came to me, okay?”

Castiel nods.

“Gabriel’s biological parents were not bad people, but they done some bad shit. He don’t know where they are now, if they’re dead or alive. They was always poor, and soon as the economy went
straight to hell his mama and his daddy both lost their jobs. For the life of them they couldn’t find work, and then his daddy started peddling drugs and his mama got more and more depressed. He acted up ‘cause he wanted to be noticed, but it only made his folks hurt more. They started gettin’ into the business of meth, honey, and got so hooked they forgot about him,” she exhales and shakes her head, lifting her eyes at the ceiling before she goes on, “He been better since he started living with me, but he ain’t immune to feelin’ what happened to him. He’s still afraid that we’re gonna forget about him, too.”

She glances off to the side and massages between her brows before she continues, “Scares me that so many kids get forgotten, always has. I grew up in the system same as you, but it took me a long, long time before I realized the things that happened to me when I was a child weren’t even close to being okay. Soon as I did realize, though, I registered myself for all them classes you need for this job and I started taking in kids. I worry ‘cause I worry ‘bout you, Castiel, not a check.”

“I’m not sure what to do with that,” he answers truthfully.

“You’re gonna accept it, is what you’re gonna do,” Missouri responds, “I know you only been here a few months but you are my child, sugar. We are family. Do you understand me, or do I have to sit you down in front of goddamn Lilo & Stitch? Family means no one gets left behind, or forgotten.”

Castiel swallows, and looks down this time not out of forced submission but because his eyes are burning and he’s embarrassed. He says to the floor, “Okay.”

“You understand me, then?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says, and then hastens to correct, “Mama.”

“All right. Good. You’re grounded,” she says.

Castiel glances up at that.

“Don’t you give me that look,” Missouri chides, “You sneak outta your bedroom, don’t come home ‘til morning, and when you do you’re dirty and smell like you just come outta Pineapple Express. You are grounded for a week, and if I catch you sneakin’ around again it’ll be another week for every time it happens. Now go shower, and I’ll fix you some breakfast.”

“Yes, Mama,” he says.

An alien-feeling smile splits his face.

X

Castiel obediently does not go out for a week, although Missouri generously makes an exception for Thursday’s GSA meeting, which takes place in one of the upstairs history classrooms. He passes by Crowley, who is dressed in an orange detention vest, on the way there. When he says hello the guy looks up briefly.

To Castiel’s surprise, he asks, “And where are you headed on this fine afternoon?”

“Oh, GSA,” he says. Crowley’s kind of an asshole, but he isn’t very scary. Or maybe Castiel’s more confident in his own sexuality than he was a mere month ago. Either way, he’s fine with the expression on Crowley’s face, a mix of several things that Castiel neither knows nor cares to identify.

Then he smiles a smile that does not reach his eyes and says, “You like a good man, hm?”
Castiel rolls his eyes and then rolls his hips in a wide slow circle, biting back, “Oh, baby, I love that cock,” before trotting past and toward the meeting room.

When Castiel arrives Charlie has already set up some mini cans of soda and knock-off organic Oreos, the latter of which Dean already has his hands full of.

“Hey, Cas,” he says, mouth full.

He lifts a hand in greeting, and when Dean swallows his mouthful of cookie he says, “How goes the grounding?”

“Boring,” Castiel shrugs. “I’ve never been grounded before. It’s a little like doing what I would typically do anyway if I didn’t have friends. And Mama put me on dish duty for the whole week.” Castiel hates dish duty, mainly because he dislikes touching other people’s food, and also because his fingers get pruney even if he wears rubber gloves. He vastly prefers vacuuming or dusting, but Missouri knows that and intentionally assigned him the chore that would annoy him most. He’d rather clean the toilets, to be honest.

“Dude, that blows,” Dean says, “My dad doesn’t ever ground me, he just yells at me a lot.”

And gives you black eyes? Castiel thinks of saying this, and then doesn’t, because it’s clearly a matter that Dean does not wish to discuss. Perhaps after witnessing all the kids that flow through Mama Missouri’s care, Dean would rather live with a heavy-handed father than become a child in the system. Castiel cannot blame him for that.

“It isn’t that bad,” Castiel admits, “But I’m ready for it to be over.”

As soon as the few other members of their little unit arrive at the classroom, Charlie gets down to business. Mainly they begin their meetings by going person by person and discussing how their weeks have gone, and then they cover business items. Today checking in with all of them takes up most of the time, which nobody tends to mind, since it’s sometimes nice just to talk and have friends that understand.

He and Dean are the only students on the late bus that takes them back in the direction of Sugar Lane, and it’s nice. He’s glad that Mama Missouri let him go, and decides not to be a pain that night, dish duties aside.

Yet still, unease comes with the attachment to this place.

He doesn’t want to call any of this his home.

X

The following day when Castiel boards the bus, Crowley pats the space beside him instead of putting his headphones in and ignoring him like he usually does. It’s a little weird, but he figures it’s better than being treated like an insect. They still don’t talk, but when they part ways at the front of Smoky Bluff, Crowley smiles at him and tells him to have a marvelous day.

“Hey,” Meg says, when he sits down beside her in their usual spot in the cafeteria, before the bell rings.

“Hello,” he replies.

“Did you do the –”
“Biology homework? Yes,” he says, and slides a folder in front of her.

“You’re the best, Clarence,” she says.

Castiel replies dryly, “I try.”

“What was up with you and that kid with the big eyes?” asks Charlie.

Castiel glances out the window, to the area where the bus drops them off in the morning, and shrugs.

He says, “Crowley typically ignores me. I wonder if he’s ill.”

The thought fades, however, when Dean sits on Castiel’s other side with a package of strawberry Poptarts. He offers a piece of one to Castiel, who declines a moment before Meg snatches the morsel out of Dean’s palm and sticks it in her mouth before any of them can complain. She returns his Biology homework a few minutes later, but Castiel is occupied by Dean babbling on about Cassie. Apparently, during Cas’ confinement, he’s had much more time to spend with her. Most of that time is spent making out, Dean reports.

He tries not to be jealous of Cassie, because he’s met her a handful of times and she seems like a nice person, a girl that likes rock and roll, glittery nail polish and the same cartoons that Dean likes. She can’t be that bad, but he’s still a little envious, because she knows what Dean’s mouth tastes like.

Castiel thinks on this all the way up until their lunch break. He dumps his books in his locker and removes the sack lunch that he made for himself, and when he enters the cafeteria he sits by Dean, who seems to always arrive for the food before any other student, and has a Styrofoam tray laden with suspect-looking pizza and an even more suspect-looking fruit cup.

When Charlie sets her food alongside theirs, Cas excuses himself to use the restroom. He does his business and is washing his hands when the door swings open and he’s greeted by a smile that he’s only just become acquainted with.

“Hello, love,” Crowley says.

“Um,” Castiel replies, and reaches for the paper towels, “Hello?”

“Here’s the deal,” Crowley goes on, “I find you attractive. I know I’m attractive. So, I’m thinking you should kiss me.”

Castiel drops his soiled paper towel on the floor and clears his throat to stutter, “Come again?”

“Kiss me,” Crowley says, and edge of command to his voice.

Castiel’s eyes slide over his shoulder. For an instant he expects to see Dean there and laughing his head off, but it’s nothing but unoccupied urinals and open stalls. He looks back to Crowley and stares for a long, long moment.

Crowley’s brows lift high on his forehead and he says, “Well?”

“Uh,” Castiel says, “Are you entirely certain you want that?”

“Absolutely, darling,” Crowley responds.

And if that’s how it is now, then fine, Castiel can work with that. He takes one large, awkward step forward and leans in. He presses his lips to Crowley’s and is surprised to find that he doesn’t hate it. His lips are soft and he tastes like peppermint chapstick and cinnamon gum. Before he can think his
actions through, he has his fingers carding up through Crowley’s cropped hair and his other hand resting on his waist.

When Crowley pulls back, he has another smile on his face. Castiel leans in for another kiss, but he holds his hand up and says, “Not bad, but I have lunch detention to attend to. See you around, darling.” And he sweeps from the bathroom in a dramatic swish of black, his pea coat disappearing around the bend.

For several stunned minutes all Castiel can do is stand in the center of the downstairs boys’ bathroom, wondering what the hell just happened and trying to decide if he liked it or not. The spell is however broken when a round-faced football player and a couple of his friends saunter in – time to make himself scarce.

He returns to the table with Charlie and Dean and Meg, and when he sits, he says, “I kissed Crowley.”


“I think I liked it,” Castiel adds.


X

Things in Castiel’s life takes a sharp turn after that, going from weekends at the fort with Dean and Sam to awkward Saturday afternoons at Crowley’s house, a huge beast of a building in rich, white suburbia. Crowley lives with his mostly-absent business woman mother, whom Castiel has seen a grand total of once across the span of three or four weekends. She is beautiful but also terrifying, so he does his best to avoid her when he can manage it. Sometimes he and Crowley do homework or watch movies (which Crowley keeps referring to as “films”), but mostly they climb up in the giant, plush queen bed in Crowley’s bedroom and make out.

For the most part this making out consists of sloppy touches and ending up in strange, uncomfortable positions of tangled, gangly limbs and rucked-up clothing. Sometimes they get hard in their pants and sometimes they don’t; either way, neither of them makes the move to put their hand down the other one’s pants.

Although on one embarrassing occasion, Castiel gets so worked up by what they were doing that he comes in his underwear. He turns bright red and stammers and Crowley laughs at him, but he isn’t a complete dick. He loans Castiel a change of clothes, though he makes him promise that he’ll launder them and return them the following Monday on the bus.

It is weird, but that’s how things are between them, and Castiel likes having somebody to kiss even if it isn’t an ideal somebody. Crowley isn’t always nice but he isn’t terrible, either – he makes decent dinners and has a sense of humor that exasperates and amuses Cas all at once.

Still, weird.

When the end of November fades into December, Dean announces that he’s finally struck home with Cassie and that they are going steady. She sits at their table at lunchtime now, and laughs loudly at all of Dean’s jokes, even the ones that aren’t very funny.

The days whip by and they’re all hazy and all strange, like Castiel’s body is going through the motions but his head is someplace else. After dinner on the sixteenth of December, Castiel is scrubbing dishes with rubber gloves over his hands and cursing the hot water that’s leaking inside
them and making his fingers wrinkly.

Then Mama appears behind him and says, “You know, you’ve been here for almost six months now.”

She’s right. He has been here for almost six months. He pauses the work of his sponge and looks back at her, struck by the realization that in the space of that six months he’s shot up several inches and is taller than Missouri is, now. He confesses, “It’s the longest I’ve ever been in one place.”

“I know, honey,” Missouri says. She places a hand in between his shoulder blades and rubs his back, and then kisses his cheek. He tenses up but still feels a rush of that stupid fucking need to be loved, of affection he feels in return and has desperately been trying to tamp down for fear of when Mama Missouri gets tired of him. She says softly, “How about you join us after you finish up, hm? We’re watchin’ Christmas movies in the den.”

Castiel hesitates. This time of year tends to suck for him, because his birthday comes and marks another transient, miserable year, and then there’s the holiday of Christmas itself, which movies say is supposed to be all about family. Castiel has never experienced a Christmas that was about family. He’s a little afraid to start now.

But when December first had rolled around and Missouri asked all the kids to help decorate, he did, and so did everybody else, Gabriel and Anna and Zeke and Hester and even Raph and Uriel. Along the wall in Missouri’s living room, to the left of the beautiful bookcase, stockings had been mounted for every child. They were quilted with tacky fabric, but the tops had all been cross-stitched by Missouri’s own hand.

Every time Castiel sees his own stocking, a green one patterned in holly, and the name Castiel cross-stitched beside a snowman, something inside him lurches and he feels like throwing up and hugging Missouri all at once. If she ever catches at him staring at the damn stocking, she never says a word.

So now that she’s looking at him with that warm smile, all festive in a red and green robe and silky green pajama bottoms, he can’t say no. One side of Castiel’s lips quirk up, and he agrees, “Okay, Mama.”

“Good boy,” she says, and ruffles his hair.

He snorts and swats her away, and when she exits the kitchen, he returns to scrubbing plates as though nothing happened at all.

When Castiel finishes the dishes he dries his hands on a festive, snowflake-patterned towel and joins the rest of the kids and Missouri in the den. Gabriel ushers him over to place on the huge sofa that he saved just for him, and it’s thoughtful, and also kind of odd. They watch the cartoon version of The Grinch That Stole Christmas first, and then Rudolph, which Castiel finds himself drifting off to right in the beginning.

He falls asleep with his head against the back of the couch and his knees tucked up to his chest. When he opens his eyes again, the den is dark and empty, and somebody’s tucked a blanket all around him. He wraps the blanket tighter around his shoulders and slides further down on the couch. Castiel goes back to sleep.

On the morning of his birthday, Castiel showers and contemplates how it feels to be fifteen. Mostly it feels exactly like fourteen, although in his opinion he sounds vastly older than he did yesterday.
Usually he wouldn’t linger in the shower and use up so much hot water, but since it’s his birthday he feels entitled to something, at least, like a present to himself for not being dead or addicted to something yet.

He has to run to Mama’s home because it’s freezing outside, gray and threatening snow, and with his damp hair it feels ten times worse.

“Happy Birthday,” Missouri greets, as soon as he closes the door behind him.

“Thank you,” he says.

He’s just glad somebody remembers his birthday, because that’s never happened before. It’s a pleasant way to begin the morning, and he doesn’t mind at all when Missouri looks in the refrigerator and finds them out of a few breakfast essentials.

“I don’t wanna ask too much of you on your birthday,” she says, “but would you mind runnin’ down to the corner store and grabbing a couple things?”

“I can do that,” Castiel says.

Missouri writes a list in her pretty script and tucks a twenty dollar bill into the palm of his hand with a smile and thanks. He crosses the short distance back to the boys’ home and stops briefly by his bedroom to throw a real coat over his shoulders and pull a warm hat over his head, even though his hair is still wet. Mama made the hat for him, and it’s probably the nicest thing that he’s ever owned.

Forgoing gloves and shoving his hands into the pockets of his coat, he shuffles through the tangle of mobile homes and trailers to the outside street. Few people are out, which doesn’t surprise Castiel. It’s the morning of Christmas Eve, and it’s meant to be spent with family. He wonders what the Winchesters do for the holidays, but Dean doesn’t seem too keen on discussing it, so he’s never explicitly asked.

The convenience store is only down one block and across the street, but he’s still shaking like a leaf when the automatic doors slide aside and the warmth of the store swallows him up. An annoyed looking employee in an ugly vest greets him and he mumbles something back just to be polite before he finds the things that Missouri asked him to.

Eggs
Milk
Shampoo (for the girls)
Something for yourself

Castiel swears that there is milk in the fridge, but whatever, he won’t argue with his foster mom. He gathers up the items, deciding on a packet of M&Ms for himself, because they’re inexpensive and he doesn’t want to overdo it. The flat-lipped cashier places the items in a plastic bag, which Castiel loops around his wrist so that he can keep his hands in his pockets as he walks back.

He wonders what Christmas is going to be like here. Every household has different traditions, and he’s not sure what kind Mama Missouri and the other foster kids bring with them.

When he opens the door to Missouri’s home, it’s strikingly quiet.

“Mama?” he calls, and when he gets no answer, he steps a little further into the house and says, “I’m
gonna put these away. Do you want me to take the shampoo to the girls?”

He takes a couple more steps inside, and –

“SURPRISE!”

Not only does Dean leap out at him from behind the furniture, but the rest of the foster kids, Missouri, Charlie and Meg, Ellen and Bobby and Jo, Sam, and even Crowley. Mama Missouri has a cake in her hands. A cake.

“What?” is the first word out of Castiel’s mouth.

Dean grins, “It’s a surprise birthday party, dumbass.”

“Dean Winchester, you watch your tongue in my house,” Mama scolds.

“Sorry,” he says, but the shit-eating grin on his face suggests that he’s anything but. He says, “We made you a cake and Sam and me got you a present and there are some others too. We’re gonna put some candles in the cake so that you can blow them out.”

Castiel stares at them. They’re all smiling at him, even Crowley, though it’s a small and slightly-smug smile, like he’s one-upped Castiel in some way. He’s so –

so confused. His biological parents didn’t believe in birthday parties, and previous families always combined his birthday with Christmas since it was so close – if they even really celebrated Christmas. And here he is now, surrounded by people that he’s far too attached to, and they’re doing things for him that people do for the people they love, and it’s too much.

Naturally, Castiel does the most logical thing.

He bursts into tears.

The smile slips off of Dean’s face and he says, “Fuck. Was it – was it something I said?”

Cas shakes his head and babbles, “Sorry. Oh Jesus, I am so sorry. I’m, it’s not bad crying, I just. I’m so confused. I’ve never had a birthday party before and I feel dumb because I do not know what I am supposed to do.”

“You’ve never had a birthday party?” Dean whispers.

He keeps shaking his head and presses his fists against his eyes to chase away the tears before he says, “I’m sorry. I ruined it. I’m so sorry. I can try again. I’ll – I’ll go back outside and come back and –”

“Oh, shut up,” Dean says, and yanks Cas forward into a steady bear hug, warm and solid. Castiel sniffs and tries not to get tears or snot in Dean’s shirt. Dean, meanwhile, seizes control of the situation and commands, “Mama, can you put the candles in Cas’ cake so he can blow them out?”

“Sure thing, sugar,” she says, and Castiel can smell her perfume as she breezes by.

He pries his face out of Dean’s neck and wipes his eyes on the sleeves of his coat, accepting gratefully when Ellen discreetly hands him a tissue so he can mop up the mess of snot on his face. He even manages a wobbly smile when Charlie snaps a picture of him over his cake. There are fifteen candles, slim and striped white and green. The cake is clearly made from scratch and hand-frosted, and in Missouri’s clean script on the top it reads Happy Birthday Castiel. His eyes start to
water again at the sight, and he has to take a second to breathe and collect himself before he leans over and makes to blow out the candles.

“Wait, wait,” Sam says, waving his arms, “You have to make a wish, Cas!”

“I do?” Cas says, brows crushing together, “Okay. Um, I wish –”

“No,” Sam says, “You can’t tell people what your wish is or it doesn’t come true. You have to think it and then blow out your candles.”

That is a strange tradition and Castiel doesn’t know how much stock he puts in it, or so the logical part of his brain says. The other part of his brain, the section run ragged by emotion, by confusion and surprise and pleasure and fear all bundled into one, immediately thinks I wish I had a family.

Well, there’s no taking that back, he supposes, so he leans over and blows a stream of air until all fifteen candles are out.

Everybody claps and Missouri places the cake on the kitchen table. She retreats to the kitchen and returns with a knife, cutting the first slice and placing it on a paper plate. She hands it to Castiel with a plastic fork.

“Do I wait for everyone else to have their piece?” he asks, feeling stupid.

“No,” Sam pipes up again, appearing at Castiel’s side, “No one gets to eat cake before the birthday kid. That’s the rules.”

“Oh,” he says, but takes up the plastic fork and eases off a cautious bite of cake.

It’s delicious. It’s the perfect amount of sweet and melts on his tongue and makes him want to cry all over again. That’s how good it is. When he swallows, he says, “Thank you, Mama.”

She waves him off, “Don’t you go thankin’ me. This was all Dean’s idea.”

So Castiel turns his attention and says, “Thank you, Dean.”

“It’s nothing,” he shrugs.

Castiel shakes his head and says, “It is not nothing. It’s…amazing. Thank you. Really.”

The high string of emotions in the air fades a little as cake is doled out and people give him well-wishes. Dean turns on some of his music and people laugh and tease. Charlie hugs Castiel and Meg punches him lightly in the shoulder with a soft, “Happy B-Day, Clarence.”

After everyone finishes their cake, Dean steers Castiel into the Den, where an entire pile of presents sits in the center of the floor.

“Those,” he manages, “Those are all for me?”

“Yup,” Dean says.

And then everyone sits and watches as he opens them. Charlie’s present is the first season of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and a t-shirt with the Ravenclaw shield emblazoned on the front. Mama Missouri knit him a scarf to match his hat, and he immediately wraps it around his neck. It smells like her perfume and is warm and soft and lovely. Meg stuck ten dollars in a card with a crude joke inside that makes Castiel turn pink and makes her laugh. Crowley purchased a copy of Moonrise Kingdom for him, one of the movies that they’d watched together at his house. Even little Hester gives him a
present, a crudely-drawn crayon depiction of himself in a party hat. She hugs him when he says thank you.

“This one’s from me and Dean,” Sam says, and thrusts the last present into Castiel’s lap, “Dean shoveled, like, twenty million driveways so we could get it for you.”

Castiel peels back the newspaper that the gift is wrapped in. His breath catches when the first part of the box is exposed.

One hundred and fifty Prismacolor colored pencils.

“Dean,” Cas says, incredulous, “This set is over a hundred dollars.”

Dean shrugs, “I know. But I saw you lookin’ at it last time we were at the mall, and y’know. I wanted to get something nice for you. Sammy helped.”

“Thank you so much,” he finally says, and clutches the set like it might blow away, “Thank you, Sam. Thank you, Dean.”

The party guests linger for a little longer after Castiel finishes opening his gifts, but no one can stay for too long as it is Christmas Eve. So he hugs his friends and says thank you to every one of them. It amazes him that they all came here on such a family-oriented day, taking time out of their holidays just to wish him a happy birthday. It makes him feel dumb and emotional all over again.

When Dean sees Cas’ face start to crumple, he socks him in the shoulder and says, “Dude, no more tears. It’s your birthday.”

“And I can cry if I want to,” Castiel says back through a watery laugh.

Dean laughs too, and pulls Cas in for another hug. Sam pries them apart so that he can hug Castiel, too, and complains about Cas getting too tall to be able to hug right anymore. Dean rolls his eyes to this and pulls Sam away by his collar with a, “Don’t suffocate him, kid.”

Sam sticks his tongue out at his older brother.

Just before they leave, Dean says, “Oh yeah, and Merry Christmas too. I left you a little something—something on your bed.” He winks, and Castiel’s heart leaps up into his throat.

Even after everyone is gone and his foster siblings have lost interest in the chaos and merriment, Castiel can’t help the grin that stretches his face.

Today is the nicest day that he’s ever had.
Don't Make No Difference to Blood

Chapter Notes

I feel as though I should mention that there's a lot of Cas experimenting sexually with people that are not Dean in this chapter, so if you want to skip that, the beginning and the end are not included in this.

Chapter Track: Let’s Get High – Edward Sharpe & the Magnetic Zeros

Don’t Make No Difference to Blood

 kinda fruity, but I got the other one ;P

That’s the note on top of the package on Cas’ bed. When he peels the Sunday funnies off of the narrow box, he sees more written in Dean’s bad handwriting on the grain of the box: and don’t open until Christmas, jackass. He snorts softly and sets the gift aside underneath his bed. He figures it’s more festive to open it on Christmas, even if Dean wouldn’t know the difference either way.

X

The morning of the Holiday itself begins with a nightmare, of Jesus on the cross above him and stinging pain in his bare bottom as his mom smacks it over and over again. Sweat slicks his body when he’s jolted from the dream by a hearty bellow:

“IT’S CHRISTMAS, MOTHERFUCKERS!”

“Gabriel, will you be quiet,” Zeke complains from the bunk above Castiel’s.

Andy adds, “You know Mama’ll kill you if she hears you talking like that.”

“Oh whatever,” Gabriel says. He throws his robe around his shoulders, a cozy, plaid thing, and urges, “Come ooon. Presents, you guys.”

Castiel sits up in bed and rubs the crust of sleep out of his eyes. He’d rather not be awake this early, but at least he isn’t having that stupid dream anymore. The nightmares don’t come nearly as much as they used to, especially since moving to Sugar Lane, but every once in a while they manifest… usually when he’s happy, as if to remind him of his origins, where he came from, who he is. Castiel Novak, son of religious zealots that fasted themselves to death. Castiel Novak, orphan.

Castiel Novak, alone.

But before he can loiter on thoughts of aloneness and his dead parents, he remembers the present from Dean sitting underneath his bunk. He leans over the edge of the mattress and retrieves it. For a second, he just stares at the box in his lap and wonders what Dean means by saying that he has the other one. He eases the lid off and folds back the tissue paper arranged carefully inside.

It’s…a bracelet. It’s made out of woven leather cord, thick and braided. A charm glints in the dim morning light of the bedroom, dangling in the center. It’s a star of some kind, something pagan, the points encased in a circle and then a silver sunburst.
“Huh,” he says.

“That from your boyfriend?” Gabriel asks.

Castiel narrows his eyes and says, “He’s not my boyfriend, asshat.”

“But it’s from him, isn’t it?” Gabriel asks.

“Yeah,” Castiel concedes, and slides the braided leather over his wrist. It smells masculine and feels soft against his skin.

At the bottom of the box sits a card. Castiel removes it and gives a thoughtful hum when he reads the text – *Anti-possession star: symbol of protection. 100% sterling silver. Clean with silver polish and soft-bristled toothbrush when necessary.*

It’s a friendship bracelet.

The Christmas festivities begin before Castiel can admire the way that the leather cord looks on his wrist, or how strong it is, or how masculine it smells. They all trudge through a thin layer of powdery white snow to Missouri’s home in their pajamas, freezing until the mobile home engulfs them in warmth and the smells of cinnamon and citrus.

They all drink wassail in Christmas mugs, ugly things purchased no doubt from Goodwill. Castiel’s mug is shaped like the head of Saint Nick, complete with jolly smile and pink-tinted nose. He finds it disturbing to be drinking from the skull of Santa, which he voices to Missouri, and receives only an arched brow in return, so Castiel doesn’t say it again.

There’s chocolate in his stocking, and two brand new pairs of boxer shorts. That shouldn’t be as exciting as it is, except that all of his pairs of underwear have holes in them and he’s been in need of new ones since before he came to live here months ago. All the kids do their own laundry, but Mama is a reputed psychic after all. Or maybe, as Dean says, she’s just smart.

The gifts number few, but each lights a smile on a foster sibling’s face. Hester gets one of those monster dolls she’s been dying to have, Raphael the jersey of a football player that he’s fond of, Andy several issues of his favorite comic series, and Gabriel a make-your-own-candy set, which has him delighted enough to throw his arms around Mama Missouri’s neck and smack an obnoxious, wet kiss to her cheek. She rolls her eyes, but wraps one arm around his back and ruffles his hair. Just like a regular mom would, Castiel thinks.

His own gift feels lightweight when he picks it up from under the tree. The wrapping paper is crisp and perfectly creased, patterned in strings of Christmas lights and jingle bells. A fat blue bow sits on top, beside it a gold tag that reads *To: Castiel, From: Santa.* He glances at Mama at this, and she just smiles, motioning for him to go on.

No one’s ever bothered to pretend that Santa is real for him.

He peels back the paper methodically, too touched by the care put into the package to tear into it the way Gabriel had his gift, or the way he had into the newspaper taped haphazardly over Dean’s friendship bracelet.

Inside is an iPod. It’s an old model, an early generation as far as Castiel knows, but he’s never had one before so he can’t say. A package of brand new headphones rests alongside it in the box.

“It’s refurbished,” Mama explains, “Looks like there’s a card for some songs on iTunes in there, too.”
“Thank you,” he says, and mostly feels stupid, because he doesn’t know what else he’s supposed to say.

Missouri winks, “I’ll pass that on to ol’ Saint Nick.”

After the presents are all open, they help pack the debris of ribbon, wrapping paper, boxes and packages into plastic garbage bags so they have room in the den to sit and watch movies while Gabriel and Mama prepare Christmas dinner.

It’s the most lavish feast that Castiel has ever been treated to in his entire life: a Christmas honey ham, diced potatoes roasted in this oven with salt and rosemary, fresh rolls made from scratch with garlic and butter, broccoli and cheddar casserole, and to top it all off for dessert, a layered fudge cake dripping with sugar glaze and decorated with sugared raspberries.

He retires to the boys’ home with belly full to bursting, and promptly snags the space in front of the ancient machine that passes as a computer, hooking his new iPod into it and setting up the software.

He spends hours with his headphones hooked into the computer and listens to song after song, beginning with pop songs that he vaguely recognizes and winding through recommendations until he lands in tunes with heavy beats and furious vocals. Dean probably would not like this music, but he does.

Sometime after eleven o’clock at night, Raph throws a fit and demands a turn on the computer. Castiel acquiesces rather than argue, and takes his iPod with him. He doesn’t realize how tired he is until he lies back on his mattress with his headphones in his ears, music that shouldn’t count as a lullaby rocking him back to sleep before he has time to count his sheep.

Dean’s birthday is not nearly the affair that Castiel’s is – he has Charlie, Meg, Cas and Cassie over for a while, without John Winchester in sight. They don’t have cake, but they take turns playing Mario Kart on Charlie’s Wii, which she brought over in her Iron Man backpack. Charlie’s skills at Mario Kart far exceed anyone else’s, but Castiel still has fun. He likes feeling like he’s a part of something, likes being included.

Meg is the first to go, citing her father as the reason, and Charlie follows soon after, giving tight hugs to Dean, Sam, Cassie and Castiel each and making them promise that they’ll “make good choices.”

Dean says he promises nothing.

They’re halfway into some nondescript action flick when Dean removes his arm from where it’s twined around Cassie’s shoulders, and tilts his head toward the kitchen. Cas follows him. He doesn’t speak as Dean opens the fridge and the light from inside spills into the dark kitchen. When he offers Castiel a soda, he accepts. Dean takes a beer for himself.

“So, uh,” Dean says, and scratches the back of his neck, “I wanted to ask if it was like, okay if I took Cassie to the fort?”

Castiel frowns into his store brand grape soda.

“Why?” he asks.

“Dunno, girls like that kinda stuff,” Dean explains.

“And you…want to be alone?” Castiel questions.
Dean takes a sip of his beer and leans back against the kitchen counter. Castiel tries not to notice how nice Dean’s low-slung jeans look where they sit on his skinny hips, or how his faded AC/DC t-shirt hugs his body like a glove, too small, but a relic from Dean’s years pre-puberty that he isn’t yet willing to part with.

They both are much taller than they were when they met, and skinny like they’ve been pulled tight on taffy machines. Mama is always telling Castiel to eat more, to put some “meat on them bones,” but Cas thinks Dean needs the extra calories more than he does.

“Yeah,” Dean finally says, like Castiel hasn’t just been licking him with his eyes, “She promised me somethin’ for the sweet sixteen, you know? But I can’t do it with my dad sleeping in the other room. Figured I’d do some chick stuff, like bring a blanket or some shit.”

Castiel swallows the knot in his throat and makes a point not to look at Dean. It’s silly for the fort by the creek to mean something to him, especially since they haven’t used it much since winter came around. But against his will and better judgment it does mean something to him. He wouldn’t bring Crowley there, so why should Dean bring Cassie?

But he forgets, Dean has feelings for Cassie, and Castiel doesn’t have those same feelings for Crowley. He and Crowley just like making out and not being alone. Dean and Cassie genuinely like each other. So it’s different.

“It’s okay if you say no,” Dean hastens to add.

When they meet eyes, it’s clear. Castiel wants to tell him that no, it’s not okay to bring your girlfriend to our fort, because that’s ours.

Instead, Castiel replies, “That’s okay. Go ahead and take her.”

“Cas, you sure, man?”

“Positive,” Castiel replies, and pastes a smile to his face.

When they return to the cramped living room inside the Winchester trailer, Dean crawls over on the sofa and whispers something in Cassie’s ear. They shuffle around in front of the movie and Dean folds a blanket in his arms before they collect their coats, slip their feet into shoes, and disappear outside. The front door closes quietly behind them.

“I don’t like this movie,” Sam finally says, “You wanna watch Narnia?"

“I’ve never seen it,” Castiel confesses, “I’ve read some of the series, though.”

At this news, Sam brightens and says, “Oh, you’ll love it, then. Hang on, let me get the DVD set up.”

It isn’t so bad just being with Sam, he decides, when the movie begins to play. At least with Sam he isn’t harboring childish, unrequited feelings. And for all his small, bony body, Sam Winchester is wise beyond his years, sometimes more than Dean is. Castiel only knows this from soft, misspoken sentences and things that Sam never means to say, but he knows this nonetheless. And he is glad, despite the troubles that the Winchester brothers may have with their father, they both have turned out the way that they have.

Castiel is so engrossed in the movie that the shift in the air does not immediately register. Only when Sam has been quiet for too long does he tear his gaze away. There, in the cramped cranny between hallway and living room, stands John Winchester.
Like Dean, he’s tall. The last time Castiel was up this close to him was months ago, when he first moved here. Now, the shadows under his eyes are much deeper, carved into his face like a wrinkle into a marble statue. His hair is wild from sleep, and a frown weighs heavy on his face.

“Sam,” John gruffly says, “Where is your brother?”

“I don’t –”

“He went to walk Cassie home,” Castiel lies, “He said something about not wanting her to walk back to her place in the dark.”

This appeases John, enough that he exhales and shakes his head. He rubs sleep out of his eyes and then asks, “You’re one a’ Missouri’s, ain’t you?”

“Yes sir,” Castiel responds.

“Got more respect than my kids, that’s for damn sure,” John mutters.

At Castiel’s side, Sam tenses. His face is frozen and his eyes trained on a space on the wall just behind John’s head. Castiel knows that trick well, learned it even before he was in the system. A too-long stretch of silence rolls out between the three of them, and it’s John that breaks it. He grunts and scratches his lower back, and then disappears into the kitchen. The pop of a can opening sounds from over the quiet roll of the movie. John reemerges with a can of beer in his hand, but only long enough to vanish back into his bedroom.

The room feels thick, hard to breathe in. Out of habit Castiel reaches for his inhaler from the pocket of his jeans and breathes in medicine. The walls of the tiny trailer seem to close in even more despite this.

And then Sam speaks, two soft words: “Dad’s sad.”

Castiel glances at him, not sure if this warrants a response.

Fortunately, Sam continues, “I mean, I don’t remember our mom, but Dean and dad get really sad about her sometimes. She must have been nice.”

“I’m sure she was,” Castiel says, because this seems appropriate.

“Dean hasn’t talked you about her, has he?” Sam asks, and a too-old, bitter smile transforms his face into something ugly.

“What happened to her?” Castiel asks.

“She was murdered.”

X

Things shouldn’t carry on as they normally do, but that’s exactly what happens. Castiel never tells Dean what Sam confessed to him, and Dean never indicates that Castiel is acting strange. They both throw themselves into routines, the same routines that kept them from each other before the winter break even after it, before Dean’s birthday.

Instead of riding the bus to Sugar Lane, Castiel takes the few extra stops with Crowley to his house, where they toe off their shoes in the foyer and play video games on his expensive system until one of them gets horny or hungry.
Castiel’s mind tends to drift to Dean and he hates that, hates it more than he can say, because it isn’t as if Dean spends time with Cassie and thinks of him. No, Dean isn’t lonely. Dean has a pretty girlfriend that changes her nail polish color every week and knows all the words to Carry On Wayward Son.

“Crowley,” Castiel says suddenly, and pauses their game.

“What? I was about win our match, so this had better be good,” he says, snappish.

“May I try something?” Castiel asks, “Of a sexual nature, I mean.”

That gets Crowley’s attention. He sets his controller down and blinks at Cas before he says, “Go on.”

His bravado fades a little at Crowley’s hard stare, but he reminds himself, this could help him forget. Crowley isn’t perfect or even close to ideal, but he does kiss Castiel when he asks to be kissed and spends time with him when nobody else will. So he swallows his nerves, levels his chin, and meets Crowley’s eyes. The steadiness of his own voice surprises him as he says, “I’d like to try oral sex. On you. If that’s okay.”

A smirk tilts Crowley’s lips, and he lets his legs fall open. With a gesture of his hand, he says, “By all means.”

It takes a moment for the second wave of courage to come, but when it does, Castiel slips from his place on the pristine leather couch and scoots on his knees to position himself between Crowley’s legs. Castiel licks his lips and rubs his clammy hands against his jeans to dry them before he reaches for the zipper of Crowley’s black jeans. He pulls it down tooth by tooth.

“You have very nice underwear,” he awkwardly says. The material is silky and dark blue. It looks expensive, especially for men’s underwear.

Crowley snorts, “I try.”

At first, Castiel just feels along the length of Crowley’s growing erection. They’ve done this before, at least. It started with groping each other through their jeans, and escalated when Castiel took the jump and stuck a hand down Crowley’s pants to jerk him off skin to skin. He’s only seen Crowley’s penis once before in the open. He could definitely do worse, as far as penises go. He’s not terribly long but he is thick, and uncut. Castiel, too, is uncut.

He pulls Crowley’s cock from his pants with care, and once it’s in the open he finds himself unable to do anything but stare.

“Well?” Crowley says.

Castiel colors and mumbles, “Sorry.”

With the apology bitter on his tongue, he leans forward and dips his tongue out just to taste. It makes him wrinkle his nose, but it’s not as bad as he thought it would be. Crowley tastes salty and like skin, but the smell between his legs is nice and makes Cas want to go back for more.

He is terrible at oral sex.

It starts out okay, Castiel sucking like he thinks he’s supposed to, and sinking his head down like he’s seen in porn. But as soon as Crowley thrusts back against his throat, he gags, and has to pull away to breathe. When he goes in for another try, it happens again – only, now he’s so out of breath
that he has to take his inhaler out and breathe in to make another attempt.

“Sorry,” he keeps saying, but eventually he gets a rhythm that works combined with the movement of his hands.

Crowley comes on him with zero warning. It fills up his mouth and Castiel pulls off coughing, kind of grossed out by the spunk all over his chin, but gratified that he could make somebody orgasm with his mouth, especially on his first try.

Then Crowley drawls, “You look marvelous like this,” and it all seems worth it.

X

“I gave Crowley a blow job,” he says the following morning at school.

Dean spits out orange juice from his carton onto the table and says, “What?”

Castiel slides the straps of his backpack off of his shoulders and scoots it underneath the table. He sits down and folds his hands together on the cafeteria table before he repeats, “I gave Crowley a blow job.”

“No way,” Charlie says, a stunned little look on her face.

Meg, meanwhile, claps him on the back and says, “Way to go, dude. How was it?”

Cas wrinkles his nose and shrugs, “It doesn’t taste very good. And I suppose if I want to get better at giving them I should figure out how to get a handle on my gag reflex.”

“Whoa, TM-fucking-I, man,” Dean says, and holds up his hands.

Charlie lifts one accusatory brow and says, “So we’re subject to being regaled of your sexual conquests, but Cas isn’t allowed to spill the beans? Rude, Dean.”

“I could give you some pointers,” offers Meg.

At this, Cas is surprised, but he wouldn’t be ungrateful. He says, “All right.”

X

This is how Castiel ends up in Meg’s bedroom after school with her mouth around his cock. He is really, really not sure about this – he’s never been attracted to women, but he supposes everyone has their experimental phase. His is just…backwards.

It isn’t that Meg is unattractive. Her hair is soft between his fingers and smells like coconut shampoo, and even though she’s getting purple lipgloss all over his dick her tongue is doing fascinating things down there and her mouth does look pretty stretched out around him. Her long fingernails dig into the skin just above his hip bones as she bobs her head.

Castiel comes after an embarrassingly short time, and Meg swallows it all without batting a lash. She pulls off of him and leers, “Learn something?”

“I think so,” he gasps, “I’ll…I’ll try some of that next time.”

Meg stands from her place on the carpet and slides up onto her mattress. Her bedroom is surprisingly feminine – the walls are eggshell blue, and the quilt laid out across her bed looks to be handmade. Just behind Cas’ head on her pillow sits a worn out stuffed teddy bear that’s missing one eye. It’s
cozy and homey, and he can’t help but wish that he had something like it.

It takes a few moments for Castiel to collect the shattered remains of his brain, but when he does he realizes that Meg’s dark eyes are blown wide with lust she’s staring at him like he’s supper. He’s never been interested in performing cunnilingus – ever – but it seems highly inappropriate to take pleasure without giving it in return.

So, politely, he asks, “Do you want me to return the favor?”

Meg exhales and a lazy grin glides across her puffy lips, where lipgloss is smeared. She sighs, “I thought you’d never offer.” Without any help from Castiel whatsoever, she rolls her jeans down her thighs, thighs thicker than Crowley’s and significantly less hairy, and discards them on the floor. She stretches out in front of him like a cat.

Tentative, Castiel reaches out and touches the tips of his fingers to the front of her panties. They’re silky and black and slightly damp. Definitely different than boys. He is not sure if this is good or bad. When he removes them, he leaves her in nothing but her t-shirt, and reveals a thatch of dark curls between her legs. Objectively speaking, she looks very nice.

He forewarns, “I’ve never done this before.”

“Didn’t think you had, Clarence,” she says.

The first lick against her is weird, and he still doesn’t know if he likes it, but the way that she wiggles against him is satisfying – so he does it again. And again. It’s nice to think that Castiel can do something that reduces loud and confident people like Crowley and Meg into quivering messes beneath him.

This isn’t so terrible. Still, he uses his fingers too, because he’s not sure he can make he come with just his mouth. He hears women are more difficult to tease to that.

Thankfully, Meg guides his hands and head where she wants them, and tells him what to do. It makes things easier, especially as she whispers things like more or harder that give him enough instruction to know what to do.

Castiel knows when she comes because her legs clamp tight around either side of his head, and her hands yank up on his hair. This would be exceptionally hot if she were male. However, she is not.

When he looks up, Meg says, “Thanks. Let’s never do that again.”

Relief, hot and thick, washes through him and he agrees, “Never again.”

X

When Castiel confesses to Crowley what he and Meg did, they’re upstairs in Crowley’s bedroom playing gin after having gotten each other off, lounging in nothing but their underwear. Crowley doesn’t look half-bad mostly naked – he has a little bit of chub around his stomach that Castiel likes to kiss, though Crowley seems bemused by this fact.

“Meg sucked me off,” he says, “and then I returned the favor.”

Crowley doesn’t look up from his cards, “You sucked her off?”

“No, asshole, I ate her out.”
Crowley does glance up at that, and asks, “And how was that?”

“If I ever needed confirmation that I am gay,” Castiel says, “That was most certainly it.”

Crowley laughs at this, a throaty chuckle that teases a half-smile to life on Castiel’s face. He places his cards down in front of him with a sly look and declares, “Gin. And for the record, I am very pleased that you like a good man.”

Castiel tries not to let the praise go to his head, but he can’t help loving every word of it, can’t help drinking it in. He’s so damn thirsty for praise sometimes, and it makes him sick to his stomach to think how much he loves it, how much he’ll spread his legs or open wide just to hear people say nice things to him.

He surges up over the card game on the bedspread and kisses Crowley, hard, digging his nails into the meat of his shoulders, rubbing his palms down his spine, and settling at the soft outward curve above the elastic waistband of his boxers. It takes only the barest touch of Castiel’s palm to make Crowley hard again.

He wonders…

But would that be going too far? He’s heard that it hurts.

“Something wrong, love?” asks Crowley, petting a hand back through Cas’ hair.

“I was just thinking,” Castiel starts, and then falters, “Nevermind.”

“What?”

“I just thought…but it might be – oh, to hell with it. Will you fuck me?” he asks, and then for good measure adds, “Please?”

Crowley’s brows pinch together for a moment before he replies, voice too soft over the sound of Castiel’s heart pounding in his chest, “Well, I’ve never been known to say no to a polite request.”

And then they’re out of their underwear, and Castiel is hard again, hard with Crowley’s mouth wrapped around his erection, to get him to relax, he’s told. Crowley is much better at performing oral sex than he is, and when Castiel comes he swallows without blinking an eye, staring up at Castiel through his dark lashes the entire time. When he lifts away from Castiel’s body, he says, “You look beautiful all fucked-out, you know. Absolutely…beautiful.”

God, Castiel needs to hear those words. Hear more of those words forever, how beautiful he looks, how good he is, how sweet his mouth is.

Crowley has lube, but even with the cool gel spread across his hand his thick fingers burn inside Cas. And when he slips a condom on over his cock and starts to press inside Castiel, it hurts. It stings and stretches and even when he weakly tells Crowley to use more lube it’s a tight fit. The adjustment takes too long, and Castiel wishes it didn’t hurt as much as it does, because Crowley is above him looking like he’s just seen God, sweat beading on his forehead and brows knit in concentration.

When at last he tells Crowley it’s okay to move, it still hurts, though it’s not as bad. He takes it and basks in the startled chokes of air caught in Crowley’s throat, or the murmured praise as he rocks forward. And then Crowley comes, curling into Castiel’s body, his arms laced around his thin shoulders to press their sweating chests together.

Overall, not bad.
And later, when Crowley’s mom comes home from work, if she suspects them of anything, she doesn’t say. They share a quiet meal together, and at the end of the night, she drives Castiel back to Sugar Lane in her shiny, expensive car.

Castiel makes a gargantuan effort not to walk funny, but kind of does anyway – at least until he reaches his bedroom. Except, there are more people than just his foster brothers in the room.

There’s Dean, sitting cross-legged on Castiel’s bed. He fidgets with the bracelet around his wrist, the one that matches Castiel’s own. And when Cas enters, he looks up sharply. His eyes are tired, and at first Castiel wonders if this has something to do with John.

Before he can ask, Dean says, “Cassie dumped my ass.”

“Oh,” Cas says, “Oh, Dean, I’m so sorry.”

Dean eyes Gabriel, who’s pretending not to listen as he messes around on his laptop, and then says, “You wanna take the Impala and get out of here?”

“Yeah,” Cas says, “Yeah. Let’s go.”

X

They drive out to a park, where Dean intentionally parks the Impala in front of a red and white sign that warns “NO PARKING AT ANY TIME.” No one is there but them, the sprawling brown, winter-dead lawn and leafless trees quiet and shaking with the chilly, early-February breeze. Underneath his coat and matching hat and gloves, Castiel is freezing his ass off, but Dean seems to need this, so he doesn’t say anything.

After a few long, silent minutes sitting on the hood of the car, Dean pulls a crinkled Ziploc of weed out of the inside pocket of his coat. He doesn’t ask Castiel if he wants any, just rolls them a joint, lights it, and inhales. When he passes it to Cas, he accepts.

Smoking the second time around is much easier, though he still sputters a little on the first inhale. He feels warmer with the smoke in his system, feels his muscles relax and the tension fade from in between them. After three hits, he has enough gusto to ask, “What happened?”

“Dunno,” Dean says, “She just said she wasn’t into anymore. Just sucks. Like I was trying, you know? I’m not real good with relationships but she’s all like blah-blah-blah commitment whatever, and I’m like, I’m sixteen, dude. I’m not looking for a fucking marriage here.”

Instead of comforting Dean, Castiel replies, “I lost my virginity.”

Dean’s eyes flicker and he takes another hit before he asks, “How’d that go?”

“It was okay,” Cas says, honestly, “Crowley’s nice to me and stuff.”

“Generally after your first fuck you’re supposed to be over the moon,” Dean says, pointedly, “Whether or not it was actually decent.”

“Pardon me for being a little jaded,” Cas replies, “Maybe all your stories had my expectations too high.”

Or maybe it’s because he’d really like to have Dean.

He pushes that thought out of his head and gestures for the joint. He inhales, and sighs out smoke
into the frigid night air, relaxed back against the windshield and feeling better about the day now that he’s with his best friend.

“Well, the mechanics of the thing are kinda different, aren’t they?” asks Dean, “Like, it’s two dudes, so of course it’s gonna be different.”

“You aren’t gonna ask me ‘who was the chick’?” Cas says.

Dean makes a face, “Um, you’re both guys, so…”

Castiel laughs and says, “If only everyone understood that as easily as you do.”

The conversation dies there, and for a while, they just smoke. The chilly air brings an edge of clarity to Castiel’s high, and he wonders if he’s going to be grounded again for sneaking out with John Winchester’s vehicle and renegade son to smoke marijuana and discuss the woes of their romantic ventures. Maybe not, if he explains to Missouri that Dean’s girlfriend broke up with him and he was in need of comforting.

Dean breaks the silence with, “I kinda wanna jack this sign.”

Castiel lifts his eyes to the “NO PARKING” above them.

Dean goes on, “Could be a good memento. Get dumped, park where you’re not supposed to and mope.”

“What if we get caught?” Castiel asks.

“Could just pretend to be a coupla’ teenagers making out,” he smirks.

It turns out that John Winchester keeps a well-stocked toolbox in the trunk of his car. Dean extracts a screwdriver from the mix and stands up on the hood of the car to reach the sign, unscrewing it from its perch one painful, rusted screw at a time. When they’re out, he has to pry the sign free before he leaps down and shoves in in the backseat.

“Let’s find you one, too,” Dean says.

They drive for a long while, pointing out signs for potential stealing. Castiel doesn’t want a speed limit sign, or one that he thinks could put people in a great deal of danger, he tells Dean. It’s as they drive along a suburban street not far from where Charlie lives that he spots the one he wants, mounted to street lamp: CHILDREN AT PLAY.

“That one,” he says, and Dean slows the Impala to a stop.

“Damn, Cas, livin’ on the edge,” he says, and tosses the screwdriver to Castiel, who fumbles and then catches it with both hands, “That’s right under a fuckin’ lamp. You’re on your own.”

Castiel flips Dean off, but refuses to back out now. Like Dean did, he stands on the hood of the Impala to reach the screws holding the sign in place. They aren’t nearly as rusted to the metal as the NO PARKING screws were, and when he wiggles the last screw out of place with sore fingers, the sign drops down. Dean has the foresight to catch it before they make a noise, and throws it into the backseat beside his own.

Adrenaline courses through him as they speed out of the neighborhood. Neither of them feels like returning to Sugar Lane, so instead they find an empty lot to park in and smoke another joint. Cas tingles with the excitement and with his high. He loves being like this, so relaxed and free to be
himself. He can do that with Dean. They haven’t even known each other a year and still they’ve experienced so much together. They’ve smoked and gotten drunk, played frisbee and built a fort, had birthdays together.

He’s so content here, high and thrilled, reeking of marijuana and ease.

Castiel forgets to be afraid that all this could go away.
Kids Like You and Me

Chapter Track: Bad Kids – Black Lips

Kids Like You and Me

Castiel likes Charlie’s house. She has the closest thing to a family that he’s ever seen – a dad that comes home from work a little after six o’clock, a mom that wears her hair in scrunchies and works odd shifts at the local hospital, homemade dinner together every night (although with Mama Missouri he supposes that he has that part now, too), and apparently on the third Thursday of every month, Charlie’s aunt and uncle come over with her cousins and they have a family Dungeons & Dragons game. Dean says this is nerdy, but Castiel finds it endearing.

Dean and Castiel are allowed over for sleepovers because they are boys. The first time Charlie tells Cas this he thinks she misspoke, but it turns out that she’s out to her parents and her mother is a loud PFLAG member and they go to the annual Pridewalk as a family event every year.

“It must be nice,” he says.

“Hmm?” Charlie murmurs, and pauses Star Wars on the downstairs television. The whole room smells like fake butter and popcorn, and Dean is eating Bagel Bites on the couch. He acts differently at Charlie’s house, far more relaxed than he is at Sugar Lane. His hair is mussed up from rolling around on the couch and falling asleep midway through A New Hope (which he denies doing), and he’s wearing nothing but a Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt with a hole near the collar and a pair of plaid boxer shorts.

“It must be nice,” Castiel repeats, “having your family support you.”

Charlie cocks her head at him, “What, you mean for being gay?”

“Yeah,” Cas replies, and stares at his hands. He knows his friends here support and love him, but this is the first place that that has happened. Before Lawrence and Sugar Lane and Smoky Bluff, all he was told was sin, sin, sin and how kissing boys was something he should feel badly about.

Although he does get some pleasure out of the irony that is his biological parents: devout Christians that laid down their lives for the love of their religion, assuming that their God would save them. Instead, their homosexual son is saved and lives to see another day, albeit as a ward of the state.

Castiel doesn’t know how Missouri would feel about him preferring to kiss boys.

“Oh, Mama probably already knows you like dick,” Dean says from behind them.

“Dean,” Charlie says, scolding.

“What? She’s smart,” Dean defends.

“Missouri is smart,” Charlie agrees, “But like, what are you talking about? Like, your other families?”

“I guess so,” Cas replies, though now he isn’t looking at either Charlie or Dean, and instead at his lap. He scrapes his nail at the place on his thigh where the fabric of his pajamas is pilling, and says, “When I was like ten, my foster mom sprained my wrist ‘cause I asked about having a crush on a boy. The next day I was back at a group home.”
Charlie cocks her head and frowns before she says, “Wow. I guess I just – yeah, wow. That’s really shitty.”

“You had that one chick, though,” Dean pipes up from the couch, though when Charlie and Castiel turn back to look at him, his lighthearted expression has faded to serious. He adds, “You know, in like seventh grade?”

“Oh. Yeah. That,” Charlie says. She turns to Cas and advises, “Never fall for straight people. Like, ever.”

Yeah, he knows that tune well. He probably should follow that advice better than he has been. But when he looks back at Dean and his heart beats a little harder, he doesn’t really think very much about following good advice, just that he’d like to kiss that mouth or maybe kiss those freckles.

He tears his gaze away and clears his throat, “What happened?”

“Just this really awesome chick,” Charlie sighs.

“She was not awesome,” Dean says, “She was like, the opposite of awesome. The anti-awesome.”

“Oh, fine,” Charlie concedes, “She was awesome until she found out I like girls. And then she pantsed me in the locker room. So. That was fun.”

“And called you a dyke,” Dean says. He sounds actually angry about all this, which perhaps shouldn’t surprise Castiel so much – Dean is loyal to a fault to anyone he considers a member of his family, and Charlie is certainly that.

Charlie draws her knees up to her chest and says, “Yeah. That happened. But you didn’t have to put a flaming bag of poo on her doorstep!”

“What?” Castiel says.

“It was so cliché,” Charlie mutters and rolls her eyes heavenward.

“It was not cliché,” Dean says, “It’s a classic. But you’re right. I think sticking gum in her hair was better.”

“That was you?” Charlie barks.

“Well, yeah,” Dean says, “You weren’t gonna do anything. So I did.”

“I want to be mad at you,” Charlie says, “but that’s – Dean, you dummy. C’mere.” Charlie scrambles up onto her feet and throws her arms around Dean’s neck. He struggles a little at first and complains that she’s squishing him, but eventually hugs her back, though he makes a face over Charlie’s shoulder at Cas. Castiel laughs and Charlie looks down. She whacks Dean on the shoulder.

After that they don’t talk about serious things anymore – Dean pulls a half-drunk bottle of cheap whiskey from his backpack, which they pour into sodas and sip while they finish their Star Wars marathon. The alcohol makes Castiel giggly and stupid in a way that beer and weed haven’t, and somehow he ends up laughing on the carpet with Charlie about something she said that wasn’t even that funny, while Dean makes a huge show of being able to hold his liquor and watches the antics.

Sometime after one in the morning, Charlie thinks it’s a good idea to paint Castiel’s nails, and he lets her with the stipulation that he’s allowed to choose the color. Of her collection, a dark, metallic green seems best. She chides him over and over for not staying still, and ends up having to redo her work.
on a few of his nails before she instructs him to sit still and blow on them.

Dean decides to build a blanket fort using the couch, loveseat, and a couple of chairs swiped from their place with the kitchen table. At least this fort will be gone in the morning and can’t be ruined with the memory of old girlfriends, Cas thinks, when they all settle underneath it in a pile of pillows and sleeping bags. They play Mario Kart after Star Wars ends and drink more of Dean’s whiskey.

Dean falls asleep first, limbs wrapped around a pillow and lips parted. He snores gently.

“You really like him,” Charlie murmurs beside Castiel.

Cas turns and says, “I know it’s unwise.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Charlie hedges.

Castiel cocks a brow. She exhales and makes a face, the kind of face that people make when they’re trying to let a friend down easy. She says, “The thing with Dean is – well…”

“He’s straight?” Cas suggests.

“Well, he thinks he is,” Charlie replies, “But, like. Okay. Here’s the scoop. I don’t know how much you’ve seen of John, but he’s kind of mean. Works nights. Drinks like a fish. Thing is, Dean loves his dad. And I think… I dunno. He has this thing, you know. About being ‘a man,’ and whatever he thinks that entails. Look, usually I’m the cheerleader all rah-rah to tell your crush you like ‘em. But Dean needs to figure things out himself. If we push him, he’ll push back, you know?”

“Yeah,” Castiel says.

“Don’t get all frowny face on me,” she says, and socks him in the shoulder, “You’re a good-looking dude. You’ll figure it out.”

Castiel looks down at himself and asks, “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Charlie says.

X

The next weeks pass quickly. Castiel drinks and smokes with Dean and sometimes comes with him when he takes the Impala to the drive-in. With Crowley he mostly has sex now, which isn’t quite as uncomfortable as it was the first time, and sometimes can actually be really good when Crowley puts thought into what he’s doing. He likes the days when Crowley’s mom works late and they lounge around in underwear. Those days are the best days, because those days are full of lazy making out and supper in front of the television, where Crowley will sling his arm around Castiel’s shoulders and say nice things to him.

Those days are so nice he considers telling Mama that he isn’t just hanging out with Crowley, but in fact seeing him, or whatever they’re doing. They aren’t really boyfriends, because boyfriends do things like go to movies or go out to dinner together, and they just fuck and eat food in front of the TV.

Still, they’re certainly more than friends.

And besides, he can’t get Dean’s words out of his head – that Mama Missouri is smart, and that she probably already knows that he likes boys anyway.
Thus, after dinner one night, when Gabriel is on dish duty and Castiel has the evening free, he approaches Missouri where she reads beside her bookcase, wire-rimmed reading glasses perched on the end of her nose, and a serious look on her face as her eyes scan the page.

“Hey Mama?” he says, and scratches awkwardly at his arm. He still has green polish on his fingernails, though now it’s mostly flaked away.

“Mmhmm?” she says. She marks her book and closes it, placing it in her lap with her reading glasses. It’s a little uncomfortable having her full attention on him, but he knows she never does anything halfway.

“May I talk to you about something?” he asks.

Oh Christ, he’s nervous. Dean would tease him for being nervous, but he doesn’t think that would be fair. Mama Missouri is the nicest foster parent that he’s ever had, and he doesn’t want to chance having to let that go. But still. The logical part of his brain tells him that Missouri is kind, that she has a mind as open as a rolling valley, and that she wouldn’t hurt a fly.

“You’re already talkin’, honey,” she says.

“Um,” he glances back at where Anna occupies the other couch in the room and says, “Alone?”

Missouri’s smile goes serious and she commands, “Anna-sweetie, can you leave me and your brother alone for a little while?”

Anna’s brows go up into her shiny hair but she nods and takes her book out of the living room. Castiel waits until he hears the door to Missouri’s home shut behind Anna and her distant footsteps to the girls’ trailer. He bites down on his lip and folds his hands together in front of himself before he says, “Just please don’t send me away when I tell you, okay?”

Missouri frowns, “Sugar, why would I ever want to send you away? If you got into trouble, we can fix it.”

“No, nothing like that,” he says, “It’s, um,” he takes a breath and says, “I like boys. I mean, I’m gay.”

Missouri makes a face and then waves her hand at him, “Oh, please. You think I didn’t know that the minute that Victor brought you here? In this home, we do not judge you based upon who you love. Come here.”

Missouri opens her arms and without question, Castiel falls into them. Her hug is tight, warm, and everything that he needed. He’s come to associate the smell of Missouri’s earthy perfume with home, with being embraced and with being loved.

Before he realizes what’s happening he’s crying, which is stupid. He knew that she wouldn’t stop caring about him just because he likes boys, but he was scared about it anyway. He’s spent so much of his life being scared – being afraid of hatred because of loving boys, being afraid of being left behind, being afraid of forever being all by himself, being afraid of never being loved – there are so many things to be scared of.

Missouri just rubs his back and hums a song he doesn’t know, doesn’t tell him that boys aren’t supposed to cry like his biological dad told him, or that he came out wrong because he doesn’t like girls like Dean does.

“I love you,” he blurs.
Missouri stops humming and her hands still on his back. His chest seizes up in fear that he’s said something wrong, that he misinterpreted it all. But then Missouri pulls him back to make him look up into her eyes. She says, “I love you too, Castiel. And don’t you ever forget that.”

X

After his conversation with Missouri, Castiel feels lighter. He didn’t realize how much keeping himself quiet and closeted weighed on him until now, which he tells everyone at GSA on Thursday afternoon. They cheer him on and tell him he was brave for doing what he did, and Charlie hugs him until he can’t breathe.

On the late bus back to Sugar Lane, Dean smiles and says, “I told you so.”

“You told me what?” Castiel asks.

“That Mama wouldn’t care,” he says.

“It was more than that,” Castiel admits, and then, lowers his voice to add, “You’re not allowed to tell anybody this, okay?”

“Oh kay,” Dean says.

“Swear.”

“I swear I won’t tell anybody,” Dean says solemnly.

“It was stupid,” Castiel goes on, “I got weepy and told her I loved her. And she said that she loves me too, and I shouldn’t have – I just, no one ever says that to me, you know? My parents were fucked up and when you’re in the system it’s like…you just realize that no one gives a damn. I’m that kid that slips through the cracks. I’m the one that no one gives a damn about. And then Mama gives a damn about me, and all I do is cry. I’ve never had anybody give a damn before.”

“I give a damn about you,” Dean says, voice soft.

Castiel tosses him a curious look and says, “Thank you. I give a damn about you, too.”

X

It would be that amidst this peace that Castiel finds a reason to hate everything again.

He spends his off period in the library most days and finishes any homework that he blew off the night before, or reads a book from Missouri’s shelf, or sometimes finds a new one among the shelves at the school. He’s finishing up a worksheet on mitosis for science class – an assignment Meg was dismayed this morning to discover that he didn’t have at hand to copy.

A handful of other boys sit at the study cubby adjacent to him, laughing about something one of them said. Annoying, but not out of character. There are often students that come to the library to lounge and be loud, and typically he can work through the noise. If he can’t, he sticks his headphones in his ears and ignores them.

“You see that Lisa chick?” one of them asks the table.

The others nod, “She got suuuper hot.”

“Bet you could get with her if you tried, Al,” says the dark-haired one.
“Yeah, but then I’d have to try,” smirks the other, “I’d rather just roofie her and call it a day.”

Castiel tenses at that, especially as they all laugh. He doesn’t know who ‘that Lisa chick’ is, but he is one hundred percent sure that this conversation is way off base. Before he can stop himself or find a sense of self-preservation within him, he stands up and says, “That is a highly inappropriate thing to say. You should be reported to the school, you assholes.”

“That’s highly inappropriate,” mocks ‘Al,’ in a high-pitched, squealing voice, “Who are you, my mom?”

“I don’t sound like that,” Castiel says evenly, surprised at his own guts, “And if I were your mother, I would be ashamed that my offspring grew up to become a gross-ass rapist shit.”

Al stands up at that, “What the fuck did you say to me?”

“I said,” Castiel says, “You’re a gross-ass rapist shit. I’m sure Lisa would agree with me.”

“Lisa’s a fucking skank,” says Al’s dark-haired companion.

“Cool it, Virgil,” he says, “Let me handle this asshole.”

“Al and Virgil,” Castiel muses, “Should be easy enough to report –”

A fist swings out and connects with Castiel’s jaw. He flies back into his own study cubby, knocking his science homework onto the carpet and striking his tailbone against the hard table. A noise of pain rips out of his throat before he can stop it, and Al sneers.

“Can’t take the pain, freshman?” Al asks.

“I can take it just fine,” Castiel snarls, and launches himself off of the study cubby to tackle Al. He’s no stranger to violence or fights in school – hell, he’s been targeted most of his life. Kids are cruel sometimes, and they don’t even realize it. In between projects for mother’s and father’s day respectively, Castiel realized that he didn’t have a real family, and he was teased for that, just as he’s been teased for the holes in his clothes or unwashed hair, or liking boys instead of girls.

You add all those things up, the sum is a kid that needs to know how to handle himself.

This year’s growth spurt helps in that. He isn’t quite as tall as Al but he’s tall enough that he’s a fair opponent, and knocks Al to the floor of the library with little trouble. He gets one swing in but misses before Al flips him onto his back and growls out, “You ugly little fucker. Think you can take me? You’re weak, weak-ass little shit.”

“At least I can get people to fuck me without drugging them, you sorry sack of shit,” Castiel spits.

This earns a slam of Al’s fist into his face. He feels his nose crack and the warm gush of blood, and pain, pain, pain before he remembers that he’s supposed to fight back. Behind them, Virgil whoops, “Hell yeah, Alastair. Kick his ass.”

Castiel gets a punch in upward and sends Alastair reeling onto his ass. It gives him just enough time to leap on top of him, blood flying, and hold him down by his neck with both hands.

“You’re pathetic,” he grates out, “You awful, sorry –”

And suddenly he’s being heaved up off of Alastair by a security guard, while another yanks Al to his feet and pulls him in the other direction. Only then does it occur to Castiel the weight of what he has
done. He’s been on his best behavior at Smoky Bluff thus far, but a fight at school will at least alert Victor that Castiel needs to be spoken to. It isn’t that he doesn’t like Victor, but the prospect of seeing him, the man that takes him away and drops him in new places, makes him anxious and upset.

They all wind up in the dean’s office, though after they make a trip to the nurse and Castiel gets his nose set in a cardboard cast and his bloodied knuckles bandaged. Castiel does not like the dean’s office. It’s fluorescent and ugly and there’s a stupid-looking cherub calendar on the wall to the left of the dean’s head.

“Now, according to Alastair and Virgil, Mr. Novak, you started the scuffle,” Ms. Barnes says. She doesn’t look like a typical high school dean, but what does he know? Maybe all deans have hidden tattoos peeking out of the necklines of their blouses, and wear leather biker boots.

Castiel huffs and says, “I suppose it could be taken that way.”

“I’d like to hear your side of the events,” she tells him.

“Are you going to believe me?” he asks.

“I can’t tell you if I don’t know what happened, honey,” she says.

For a moment, he’s reminded of Mama Missouri, and the feeling eases the tension in him enough to reply, “I overheard them saying horrible things.”

“Go on.”

“They were talking about a girl named Lisa,” Castiel explains, “and how they wanted to sleep with her. Which was a little gross, but okay. Then Al or whatever his name is says something about roofies. So I tell him that’s inappropriate and that I think he should be reported. And I may have told him that his mother would think he’s a gross-ass rapist shit. I think. Then he punched me, so I fought back.”

Ms. Barnes leans back in her rolling chair and purses her lips. She says, “That is certainly different than what the other boys told me.”

“That’s okay,” Castiel sighs, and knows he’s in for it now, “I didn’t think you would believe me.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” Ms. Barnes says, “it’s not the story that Alastair and Virgil told me, but considering their records and yours, I think you might be telling us the truth.”

“Oh,” is about all that Castiel can manage.

“We still, however, have to suspend you. Out of school, not in school. Your suspension will last three schooldays, since this is your first incident. Alastair’s is going to be for a week,” she explains, “I do expect that nothing like this will happen again, and I’ll note in my incident report what you heard him say about this Lisa. Do you know her last name?”

Castiel shakes his head, “Only that he said she’d gotten, I quote, ‘super hot.’”

“All right,” Ms. Barnes says, “Here’s the paperwork for your suspension. I’m going to need to have your foster mom and your caseworker sign it, okay? Bring it back to me on the first day after your suspension ends.”

Castiel sighs. “Okay,” he says.
When Ms. Barnes escorts him from her office, Missouri is sitting in the waiting area just outside. She’s wearing a set of clothing for her card-reading clients: a long, flowing skirt, and a headband-thing with colorful feathers sticking out of it. The expression on her face, however, is not nearly as whimsical as her state of dress.

“Afternoon, Pam,” Missouri says.

“Heya, Missouri,” Ms. Barnes says, “Don’t be too hard on this one. He was trying to do right.”

_Trying_ being the operative word there, he thinks, acidly.

Mama Missouri doesn’t speak as they walk back to her huge, ugly van. Castiel climbs into the front seat and buckles himself, holding his paperwork in his lap. She starts the car, but they’re out of the Smoky Bluff parking lot and on the road before she says, “That was a dumb thing you did, Castiel.”

“I know,” he says.

“You are so grounded,” she goes on.

“I know,” he says again.

“You got anything you have to say for yourself?” she asks.

Castiel hangs his head.

“Not really,” he mutters.

X

At home, Missouri fixes him an egg salad sandwich for a late lunch and instructs him to go to his bedroom and stay there. Before he finishes his food, though, he hears Missouri on the phone with Victor, and knows that they’ll be getting a visit from him that night.

He’s in the bedroom when Victor comes, listening to angry music on his iPod and cursing his own stupidity. Missouri orders his foster brothers to clear out and closes the door behind them when they do.

It’s just the three of them, then.

Victor sits on the edge of Castiel’s mattress and says, “Missouri here tells me that you got into a fight at school today?”

“Yeah,” Castiel says, and avoids looking at either of them.

“You wanna tell me what happened?” Victor asks.

“No,” Castiel responds to this.

Victor sighs, “Well, you’re gonna have to tell me, ‘cause I gotta report on this. Do you realize how badly this reflects on you, Castiel? Not even you, but Missouri, also. She takes good care of you, and I know that for a fact. You’ve been in this home almost nine whole months now, boy. That’s the longest that you’ve ever been in a home and I don’t want to have to take that from you. But if my boss sees you’ve been acting out at school and stirring up trouble, she’s gonna think you and Missouri aren’t a good match and you’re gonna end up at the group home again.”

Castiel feels himself pale at that. He doesn’t want that. He’ll do anything not to be taken away from
here. This is where his friends are. This is his *home*. He can’t be taken away from it. It’s the only home that he’s ever had in his whole life.

“Don’t make me go,” he pleads.

“I don’t want to have to,” Victor says, “I know you like it here. You always find a way to let me know if you don’t like a place. So what happened today?”

Castiel explains, and tries to be calm and rational about it all. Instead of that, he shivers and his eyes fill up with tears that he refuses to allow to spill over in front of Victor. He didn’t mean to get into a fight, he tells them both, but instinct kicked in. He didn’t know what else to do but fight back.

“You know the school has to penalize you whether or not you were the one that started it,” Victor says.

“That’s bullshit,” complains Castiel. “That isn’t fair. What was I supposed to do, just sit there and take it while he beat the crap out of me?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Victor says, “He may have lost interest sooner, and you could have reported this Alastair and his friend and gotten away from the situation without suffering a punishment yourself.”

“That’s stupid,” Castiel says.

“Well, Castiel, that’s how it works,” Victor tells him. He fills out some spaces on the paper in his lap and says, “You gotta be careful, son. We don’t want to have to take you away from here.”

Castiel feels sick when Missouri and Victor leave the bedroom and his foster brothers file back in. They try to talk to him about what happened, but he puts his headphones in his ears and ignores them, turning his music up loud so he doesn’t have to hear what else he’s done wrong today. He yanks his blanket up over his body, puts his pillow over his head, and curls into himself.

He’s going to throw up.

The one place he’s been able to find peace and call a home, and he could be taken away if he isn’t careful.

It figures he would mess up the only good he has in his life.

X

He falls in and out of sleep and once gets up to go to the bathroom, but Castiel skips dinner and ignores his foster brothers, set on letting himself feel miserable about what he did. It felt like the right thing to do, to hit that Alastair kid and make him feel bad for the things that he said, and it still feels a little like it should have been the right thing to do. But of course it wasn’t. He got it wrong, like he always gets things wrong, and could have screwed up everything he has.

At some point after the sun has gone down, he hears Gabriel say to him, “Hey, you know one mess up isn’t gonna ruin everything, right?”

But Castiel ignores him, because Gabriel doesn’t seem like he knows that much about anything, anyway.

He goes back to sleep with his stomach churning and his head heavy.
Castiel doesn’t know how much later it is when he wakes, but it’s late enough that his foster brothers are all asleep. Gabriel’s mouth is open, hand dangling off the side of his mattress, laptop cradled beside him like an infant. Andy sleeps on his stomach, and Zeke snores, much more loudly than Dean does.

The window squeaks.

Castiel jumps, sitting up. His eyes take a moment to adjust to the dark, but when they do he sees the clear outline of his bedroom window being opened, and a figure leaping through.

“Hey,” says Dean, “Whoa, your face really got fucked up.”

Castiel touches his fingers to the cast on his nose and says, “Yes.”

“I heard what happened from Charlie,” he says, “You got into a fight with some douche in the library?”

“Yeah,” Castiel replies, and the reluctance to speak about the event melts away when Dean crawls up onto his mattress and sits cross-legged in front of him. He explains, “He said something about raping some girl, and I don’t know who he was talking about, but I told him he was gross and he punched me so I fought back. Apparently, we’re not allowed to fight back.”

“What?” Dean says, “That’s bullshit!”

“That’s what I said,” Castiel replies.

“Dude, talk about a load of fuckin’ crap,” Dean shakes his head. He stares at Castiel, and after the space of a breath, he reaches out and rests his warm palm on Cas’ arm. He rubs up and down for a minute and then says, “So. I got my dad’s car and some beer. You game for the drive-in? They’re playing Clue tonight with all three endings.”

“But I’m grounded,” Castiel says.

Dean makes a face, “So what? You had a shitty-ass day. C’mon, this’ll make you feel better.”

Castiel hesitates, and spares a glance at his foster brothers on the bunk across the room. Andy remains asleep, but on the bunk above his Gabriel stares at them with eyes wide open. He smiles when he sees Castiel looking, and gives him a thumbs-up. Gabe will cover for him if need be.

“Okay,” Castiel decides.

He goes in his pajamas again, pushing sneakers onto his feet and treading carefully across the park to the Winchester trailer. Dean starts up the Impala and they roll off to the drive-in, where Chuck is working again and lets them in for free since Castiel has a broken nose. At least, that’s what he says. Cas and Dean huddle up on the hood of the car again, six pack of beer nestled between them and an itchy wool blanket thrown over their shoulders to stave off the cold. Only a few minutes into the movie, Castiel catches Dean staring at him and asks, “What?”

“C’mere,” Dean says. He moves the six pack into his lap and pats the space in between them.

“Uh,” Castiel manages, “Isn’t that a little weird? To be so. Um. Close.”

“Nah,” Dean says, “You’re my best friend, dude. And you look like you’re gonna shit yourself if you don’t get a hug like, now. So get over here, stupid.” To further his point, Dean shakes his wrist
where the braided leather cord sits. The jewelry that matches Castiel’s. Cas blinks down at his own bracelet and sighs.

He inches over close to Dean, and Dean fills in the gap between them. He shuffles the blanket so he can sling his arm around Castiel’s shoulders. He rubs Cas’ arm again and says, “You know, if it ever comes down to it, I will totally jack my dad’s car and run away with you. There’s no fuckin’ way I’m letting them take you back.”

Castiel doesn’t know how to reply to that. The words make his chest hurt so much that he thinks he might explode. How wonderful would it be to run away with Dean, to not worry about school or people with ugly insides, or being unloved? Dean gives a damn about him, he said so.

In the end, he decides to just rest his head on Dean’s shoulder. Dean doesn’t react, just keeps rubbing his arm underneath the blanket, telling him it’ll be all right between sips of beer while the movie plays on screen.

If Castiel never has to leave this spot, he’s pretty sure he’d be okay for the rest of his life.
Quite Unfair, Quite a Pair

Chapter Notes

Warning for mentions of child abuse

Chapter Track: Straight to Video – Mindless Self Indulgence

Quite Unfair, Quite a Pair

Castiel’s days of simultaneous grounding and suspension are just as boring as one might expect. Missouri, as she is wont to do for his groundings, assigns him to dish duty and restricts his internet use, though she lets him keep his iPod. He spends this time without internet listening to angry music with heavy beats and obscene lyrics that would make his biological parents ill. Maybe that’s why he likes the music so much. He reads, too, but it’s hard to concentrate when all he’s thinking about is how he wants to play Magic: The Gathering with Charlie or sneak out with Dean or get fucked by Crowley. And he can do none of those things, because he’s grounded.

On one particular night, Hester drags him inside the girls’ home. Inside, it looks much the same as the boys’ trailer, but it smells much less like sweaty socks and teenage despair, and more like cheap body spray and angst.

“What’s he doing here?” asks Anna, when Hester guides him toward their room. Like Castiel’s room, the walls are boring and white, but it’s heavily decorated with posters and the floor has dress-up clothing scattered all across it.

“I want to dress him up,” Hester explains.

Anna’s brows go up into her hair, but she shrugs, “If he’s okay with it. Did you ask first, Hester?”

Hester frowns and glances from Anna to Cas. She puts on a doe-eyed face when her gaze settles back on Castiel and says, “Please will you play dress up with me, Castiel?”

Crowley would tease him for this. Probably Meg, too. But to be honest, it’s good to be offered a reprieve from the crippling boredom of his temporary imprisonment, so he agrees, “I’d love to, Hester.”

Thirty minutes later, he sits in the girls’ bathroom on the toilet, a purple tutu pulled over his jeans and a silver sequined vest over his favorite hoodie. Anna has a makeup kit open, and at Hester’s demand is “making Castiel look pretty.”

During this venture, they’ve attracted a crowd – Ava has found them and brought with her Andy and Gabriel. Gabriel’s shit-eating grin suggests that Castiel will never live dress-up with little Hester down, but when he speaks, Castiel is relieved.

“Hey Anna, do me next,” Gabriel says.

Anna flips her hair over her shoulder and makes a face, “Are you sure?”

“Helllll yeah,” Gabriel says, “Make me pretty.”
Andy snorts and Castiel laughs. Anna scolds him for moving when she’s trying to do his eyeliner, which he doesn’t like much, because she pokes him in the eye and he keeps wanting to blink when she tells him that he can’t.

The end result is a little comical but mostly flattering. Hester tells Castiel that he looks very pretty, which shouldn’t make him swell with pride because she’s seven, and what does she know about anything, anyway? But it does. He remarks to his made-up, sparkly reflection, “I would make an excellent drag queen.”

Gabriel snorts and claps a hand on Castiel’s shoulder. He says, “Decent drag queen, at least. But I think I’ll do you one better. Paint me like a whore, Anna,” he plops down on the toilet seat with a flourish and smile.

“Gabe, watch your language,” Anna says. Gabriel rolls his eyes.

Somehow, Gabriel and Castiel getting dressed up by their foster sisters devolves into a living room fashion show in the girls’ trailer, a fashion show of which Andy becomes a third victim. Some catchy song that Castiel doesn’t know (“It’s Nicki Minaj, idiot,” Gabriel says) plays from the speakers on either side of the girls’ computer, and Hester makes them walk down her “runway” which is a couple of folded blankets laid out across the floor.

Still, they’re all laughing and he doesn’t feel stupid when he strikes a pose at the end of the blanket runway, because they’re all doing it. And hey, he’s a part of something. He already knows that he has allies in his friends at school and has an ally in Missouri, but he didn’t realize he had allies closer to home than that—siblings. Generally within the homes he’s been in before this one, there’s a solidarity that comes from being fucked over in life at too young an age, but this isn’t that kind of camaraderie. This is what he imagines real siblings feel like.

And when Missouri bustles in and announces that they need to quiet down and hustle to bed, Anna presses a black stub of a pencil into his hand and whispers, “You look really nice in eyeliner.”

It ends his imprisonment with a bang, and with it, the prospect of returning to school tomorrow does not seem as daunting.

X

A combination of last night’s antics and finding a certain appeal in his smoky-eyed reflection leads Castiel to apply eyeliner to his face before he walks to the bus stop outside of Sugar Lane. He doesn’t do the same, neat job that Anna did on his eyes last night, but it’s not terrible. At least, he doesn’t think so. At least it removes some of the attention to his nose, which no longer has the cardboard contraption on it, but remains swollen and red (three to six weeks to heal, the doctor reported when Mama Missouri took him the day after the fight).

On the bus, after all the kids from the park have boarded, Crowley covers Castiel’s knee with his cool palm and says under his breath, “It’s been boring without you, darling.”

“I am the life of the party,” Castiel replies dryly.

He and Crowley seldom talk on the bus. It’s easier to pretend to be acquaintances than be out as an item, especially since Castiel doesn’t think that they’re really an item anyway. He likes their comfortable quiet, and he likes that when the bus pulls up to Smoky Bluff, they part ways without question and drift to their respective groups of friends. They may have sex, but sex doesn’t make them a single entity.
Charlie ropes him into a hug and musses his hair when he sits down at their table before the bell rings. Meg gives him a fist pound, and Dean is nowhere to be seen. They talk about the events that Castiel missed during his suspension – apparently, according to Meg, there was a “rockin’ chick fight” in front of the soda machines. He also missed a pop quiz in biology, which reportedly “sucked epic nuts.”

Dean appears only seconds before the bell rings, sweating and bedraggled.

“Missed the bus,” he explains. Usually he and Sam hitch a ride with Cassie, but Castiel supposes that’s not really a possibility anymore. He looks haggard, more tired than Castiel’s seen him before. Dean is always full of life – he can be counted on to be rowdy and good-tempered and to make his friends laugh, but the bags under his eyes and the shine of perspiration on his brow suggests that he won’t be able to live up to his typical zeal today.

“Are you okay?” Castiel asks as they walk toward their lockers.

Dean waves him off with an exhausted, forced smile and says, “Yeah, don’t worry about me. Crazy morning. That’s all.”

“You know if there’s…stuff going on that you can talk to me, right?” Cas says, “I’m your friend, Dean.”

“Yeah, I get that, Cas, but there’s nothing to talk about,” Dean bites out, “Just fuck off, okay?”

Dean trudges off in the direction of his locker and leaves Cas standing bewildered in the crowded hallway. Somebody bumps into him, and then a few aggravated students later, an intimidatingly large guy in a KU t-shirt shoves Castiel aside, slamming him back into the row of lockers to his right, and knocking him into a petite girl wearing some sort of crown of flowers. She glares at him and he apologizes profusely.

A combination of being manhandled in the hallway and Dean snapping at him causes Castiel to be late to class, though only by a few seconds after the final bell rings.

He struggles to pay attention to everything that’s being told to him, even though he knows he should, especially since he already missed several days in a row and has no idea where they are in the curriculum anymore. But his mind drifts to tired, angry Dean. Dean doesn’t seek comfort the same way that Castiel does, he thinks. Dean likes to be strong, strong for Sam, strong for his friends, strong for his dad, and strong for himself, even when he doesn’t have enough strength left in him to handle that.

Castiel thinks on this through the rest of his classes until lunchtime, when he sits down with his bagged lunch that Missouri made for him that morning, in between Meg and Dean. Dean doesn’t have his usual heaping tray of cafeteria delights, instead, a blank space of table.

“Where’s your lunch?” asks Castiel.

Dean shrugs, “Outta lunch money. Dad hasn’t been to the store in a couple of weeks so there’s nothing I coulda brought from home.”

At this news, Castiel dumps his bagged lunch out on the table and says, “Here. We can share.”

“I can’t take you lunch, dude,” Dean protests.

Cas pulls his roast beef sandwich (deli meat and cheddar cheese between two slices of Missouri’s homemade wheat bread) and places one half of it in front of Dean. Meticulously, he splits the rest of
the lunch – an apple for him, his granola bar for Dean, each of them allotted sixteen and a half Cheez-its from the mini pack, and three Chips Ahoy. He says, “You. Eat.”

One of Dean’s brows cocks up, but there’s a smile on his lips. He takes the sandwich in hand first and says, “Mama’s rubbing off on you, huh?”

The color returns to Dean’s cheeks once he’s dug into his half of lunch, his energy returned enough that when a pretty dark-haired girl approaches their table, he slaps on a grin and looks up at her through his eyelashes. She looks at him and asks, “Are you Castiel Novak?”

Dean looks surprised. He sticks his thumb back and says, “Nah, that’s Cas.”

The girl’s gaze shifts to him and she smiles brightly. She says, “Hey. Um. I’m Lisa? Lisa Braeden. I heard about the fight that happened and I know you don’t know me, but I wanted to say thanks. So, thanks.”

Meg pipes up from behind Castiel, “If you’re trying to get with him, you should know he’s gay as Christmas.”

Castiel turns and glares.


“Hello,” Castiel says tentatively.

They chat for a few minutes, and Lisa ends up exchanging numbers with him, promising to text him. She’s nice, and Castiel likes her. Though, he can admit to a certain reserve of jealousy when she and Dean exchange phone numbers too, and he floors the flirting gas pedal. He tries to remember what Charlie said to him about Dean, about John Winchester’s idea of manhood and its effect on Dean. It helps, but not by much.

“Hey,” Dean says, and nudges Cas with his shoulder, “I’m gonna step outside. You wanna come with?”

He does. Castiel nods and tosses the remains of his lunch into one of the tub-sized trashcans before he slings his backpack over his shoulders and follows Dean out the double side-doors at the end of the hallway that sits against the cafeteria. The weather is still cool, though much warmer than it has been, enough that a handful of people in cross country t-shirts are tossing a frisbee back and forth near the flagpole.

He and Dean trek past and across the parking lot, all the way to the area that the student body refers to as The Shed, a dip in the land where a shack-like structure houses water and electric consoles. Beside it sits a ring of large rocks, arranged that way by students long forgotten by Smoky Bluff. The stones are graffitied with tags and drawings, or simpler phrases, like ashley c sucks cock or je was here.

Dean plops down on one of the rocks beside a punky-looking girl with a generous chest. She and a boy with a short mohawk smoke cigarettes and laugh about inside jokes. Dean doesn’t smoke cigarettes as far as Castiel knows – but he does pull a flask from the inside pocket of his jacket, which he offers to Cas before he takes a sip of his own.

After a stretch of silence between them, Dean gives him a funny look and asks, “Are you wearing eyeliner?”

“I’ve been wearing eyeliner all day,” Cas says, and mimics Dean’s expression back at him.
“All right, whatever floats your boat, I guess,” Dean remarks, and takes another sip, “Sorry I yelled at you earlier.”

“S’okay,” Cas replies, and only then accepts the offer of the flask. The cheap whiskey inside burns on its way down his throat, but he makes himself swallow and doesn’t even sputter at the uncomfortable sensation. He adds, “Just wish I knew what was going on with you.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, and stares down at his hands. He doesn’t speak for a while, and the sound of the punk kids’ laughter fills the empty space before he asks, “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did,” Cas says.

Dean socks him in the shoulder and mutters, “Smartass. Seriously, though.”

“Sure, go for it,” Castiel shrugs.

“Okay, so,” Dean starts, and pauses. He exhales, like he wants to speak but doesn’t know the right words. His brow furrows and he says, “Say I know this dude. This dude’s my friend, and I’m kinda, like, worried about him? What would you do?”

“Depends on what you’re worried about,” Cas says slowly.

Dean runs aggravated hands through his hair and grabs at the back of his neck. He sort of crumples into himself, like he’s trying to make himself smaller, as though protecting himself. He swallows and goes on, “All right, like. This guy’s life at home is kind of crap, but he doesn’t wanna fess up to it ‘cause he doesn’t want to break up his family, right? But the fuckin’ issue is that the crap just doesn’t stop. But he – he feels responsible for all the shit that happens between him and his folks, and he doesn’t know how to stop it without ending up in the stupid system,” Dean glances at him and adds, “No offense.”

“None taken,” Castiel replies, and then quiets and scoots further over Dean, close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath and feel the body heat through his worn jacket, “Dean, what the hell is going on with you?”

“Should’ve picked a dumber best friend,” Dean grumbles, and tips back another dose of whiskey before he says, “Look, shit’s complicated. I don’t like fucking talking about it, but I just want it to stop, you know?”

“You’ll figure it out,” Cas says, and loops his arm over Dean’s hunched-in shoulders, “You’re one of the smartest people I know.”

“That is the biggest crock of shit,” Dean snorts, “but I appreciate that, Cas.”

“I try.”

X

An ugly feeling follows Cas around like a thick, black cloud for the remainder of the day, even as school gets out and he and Dean board the bus. Dean appears to be back to normal, though the shadows under his eyes linger and there’s sluggishness to his movement and laughter. He tries not to worry, but he does anyway. The uneasiness worsens when he and Dean part ways in the heart of Sugar Lane, leaving with a quick “man hug,” as Meg calls them.

“How was your first day back?” Mama Missouri asks, when he comes through the door of her home in search of food.
Food, like Dean didn’t have at lunch today.

Missouri places a hand on each hip and says, “I don’t like that look.”

Castiel licks his lips and hastens to correct, “No, no. I’m fine. It was a weird day, is all. Do we have any Poptarts left?”

“No, Uriel ate the last of ‘em,” Missouri answers.

Castiel frowns. Should’ve defensively eaten a package when he saw there were only two left this morning.

Missouri adds, “Don’t think I don’t know you’re trying to throw me off the scent, boy. I’ll let you work it out for now, but I don’t like seeing a frown on that pretty face of yours.”

It’s only pretty because he put eyeliner on it, he thinks, and resorts to the less exciting prospect of a Chewy bar in lieu of the Poptarts he arrived home craving. He sits at the kitchen table with his snack and his homework. For a while, studying helps keep his mind off of Dean, especially since he did a bad job of paying attention today and doesn’t understand much of the work he has to do tonight. Zeke has to come help him with his math work, which kind of sucks. Zeke’s best subject is math, though, and Castiel wants to get his grade up before the end of the year. It’s at a firm C+ right now. He’d be content with a low B.

But when his homework is over and done with, tucked into his backpack, his conversation with Dean at The Shed resurfaces, and his stomach starts to hurt.

At dinner, he can’t eat much. It sucks – he’s never worried so much for somebody before that his stomach actually hurt with it. No one ever gave him a reason to worry. No people did, at least. It’s not like his worry for animals, like the dog that his foster brother hurt before Cas set aforementioned foster brother on fire to rescue the thing. He didn’t know it was possible to get this fucked up over one person, and not because of the stir of feelings in his gut he gets whenever Dean smiles at him. No, these feelings are because Dean is his friend.

Because Dean has looked out for Castiel when he needed it, and now it’s Castiel’s turn to look out for him.

The straw that breaks the camel’s back is this: “What the hell is up your ass tonight, kiddo?” Gabriel asks him, annoyed that Cas doesn’t want to participate in a game of Uno.

“I have something that I need to take care of,” he says.

With that, he ties his sneakers on his feet, throws his red sweatshirt over his shoulders and zips it, and walks out of the boys’ home. He shoves his hands in the pockets of the hoodie and treads through the park. The sun barely peeks out from between trailers and mobile homes, and no kids remain outside to play. It’s quiet, only the sound of traffic on the nearby road and the sound of a few loud televisions breaking the noiselessness.

Castiel hesitates when he gets to the Winchesters’ trailer. It isn’t like his, which is a mobile home, and has a porch and lower windows. He doesn’t think he should knock, because he knows Dean doesn’t like it when he shows up unannounced, because he doesn’t like the idea of Castiel interacting with his father.

Fortunately, the Impala sits just close enough to Sam and Dean’s bedroom that he can stand on the hood to leverage himself up. The window isn’t as easy to open from the outside as Castiel’s bedroom room is, but when he stands on his toes and wiggles it, it loosens and slides aside. The squeal the
window makes sets his heart into a quick beat, and he glances behind him, afraid of neighbors hearing and thinking there’s a break-in in progress.

Well. Technically, he supposes, it is a break-in. But it is a break-in born of friendship, not of greed.

He heaves himself up onto the sill with all the strength in his skinny arms, huffing with the effort and feeling abrupt regret for skipping gym class with Meg a few too many times. But bless his genetics, he’s thin enough to wriggle through the small opening, though he does bang his hip against the edges of the window with a grunt.

Dean is not in his bedroom, and nor is Sam. The light is off. Castiel figures they’re out in the living room watching movies and makes to open the door – but pauses.

Heavy, creaking steps set his heart beating quicker than a hummingbird’s. That’s definitely not Sam or Dean. They’re too skinny, too trained into being quiet during the day, when John sleeps. The footfalls belong to John Winchester.

There’s a muffled sound, and then the gruff voice of Dean’s father demanding, “The fuck is this?”

“Groceries, sir.”

That’s Dean.

“The hell did you get the money, boy?”

Dean replies, “From your wallet, sir.”

“I didn’t raise my son to be a fuckin’ thief,” John snaps, “Where the hell do you get off takin’ money from my wallet, you little shit?”

“We were out of food.” That voice belongs to Sam, and sounds more confident than either Dean’s voice or their father’s.

“Samuel Winchester, are you defending your thief of a brother? You a thief, too? You help him pull this off?” John’s voice raises in volume, loud enough that Castiel can make every word out clearly, now.

“No,” Sam says, “and it wasn’t stealing. We were just getting food. There wasn’t anything left!”

There’s a noise of anger and the clatter of something. Dean barks, “Don’t fucking start, old man! Sammy, go to your room.”

“But Dean,” Sam says.

“Now,” Dean commands.

Castiel hears Sam huff, and a moment later, the door to the bedroom opens. Sam’s eyes go wide in surprise when he flips up the light switch and sees Cas sitting just inside of the door, but when Castiel holds a finger to his lips, Sam closes his mouth.

Sam still whispers, “What the hell are you doing here, Cas?”

“I was worried,” Cas murmurs back, “Dean was acting strange. Does this happen a lot?”
“What, with the groceries?” asks Sam. Castiel nods, and Sam says, “I guess so. Dad works nights at the police station, so he forgets to do stuff like that sometimes. A lot of times.”

“Are they going to be okay?” asks Castiel.

Sam’s eyes slide to the door, where raised voices shout at each other, louder and louder with each argument. John snaps, “You think your mom would be proud of what you’ve done, boy? You’re a disgrace, a fucking disgrace.”

“Don’t bring mom into this,” Dean yells, “Don’t even fucking go there, dad.”

“Don’t fuckin’ use that language with me,” John growls, “I am your father. You should show some goddamn respect.”

“You think so? How about you act like a fucking father, then!” Dean yells, “How about you take care of me and Sammy, huh? How about you stop drinking every time you think of mom, ‘cause you’re too damn weak to handle –”

A crash.

“Don’t you dare speak to me that way, Dean Winchester,” John says, though his voice is quieter now, and Sam and Castiel have to strain to hear it, “Do you fucking understand me? Well? Do you? Answer me, goddamnit!”

After a long silence, Dean finally answers, “Yeah, understand you. You know what, dad? I’ll show you respect when you goddamn deserve it.”

There’s another loud clamor of noise, and then John Winchester’s voice yelling, “You get out of here, you fucking waste of space. Go to your goddamn room.”

“Fuck you,” Dean spits, but his footsteps still round the corner, and the bedroom door slams open. A cut on Dean’s head gushes blood out over his eye, and there are bruises on his neck that look like thick fingers.

When Dean sees Castiel, he demands, “What in the fresh fucking hell do you think you’re doing here, Cas?”

Cas’ mouth goes dry. The explanation that flowed so easily out to Sam sticks in his throat at Dean’s face, which stares back at him contorted in rage. For an instant he thinks that Dean might lash out, but Sam steps between them and says, “Dean, stop it. It’s not his fault. He was just worried about you.”

“He should stop fucking worrying, then,” he says through gritted teeth.

“I’m not going to do that,” Castiel says lowly, and straightens his spine. He levels his chin and continues, “You’re my friend. I don’t care if it makes you angry that I’m worried. I’ve never even been worried for anybody before. Never in my life. But you made me worried today so I came here to make sure you’re okay and you’re just going to have to like that.”

Some of the anger in Dean’s features bleeds away at this. He says, “Cas, you’re not safe here.”

“Sure I am,” Castiel responds, “I have you. And you have me.”

“And me!” Sam says.
“And Sam,” adds Cas. He takes a step forward, and Dean shies back. The way that he cows from Cas’ hand opens up a hollow pit of fury and fear inside him. Dean shouldn’t back away like that, like Castiel is a predator and he is his prey. He softly says, “Dean. Please.”

This breaks him. Dean’s face reddens, his arms coming up to wrap around himself. His eyes fill with wet and spill over silently, two single tears sliding from each eye. The pit in Castiel’s chest widens at the sight. He steps forward again, and this time, Dean doesn’t back away from him. Dean allows him to wrap his arms around him, lets him hold his head against his chest. Dean’s head is getting blood onto his sweatshirt, but he doesn’t care, because Dean is crying. Dean is crying. He’s never seen Dean cry before.

So Castiel does what people have been doing for him when he cries. He hopes it’s the right thing to do, to rub Dean’s back and tell him that he’ll be all right.

“I fucking hate it, Cas,” Dean says, the noise muffled into the skin of Cas’ neck. He grabs at the fabric of Cas’ hoodie, “I just wanna run away. Take the car, take you and Sam, get the hell out of this shithole. I don’t even care where we go. I just wanna get out.”

“We can’t do that,” Cas softly tells him.

Dean pulls away, just enough to give Castiel a long, broken look, and says, “I know that. Let a guy dream, will you?”

Castiel rubs his hand over Dean’s shoulder blade and squeezes his shoulder. He suggests, “Let me clean you up.”

“Fine,” Dean says.

Castiel opens the bedroom door and slips out, just long enough to slip into the bathroom across the narrow hallway and wrap toilet paper around his arm. He runs it under a stream of water and makes to slip back into Sam and Dean’s room, but stops. From the tiny trailer kitchen, he hears the clink of glass, the faucet running, and then John’s heavy footsteps back toward his own bedroom. The door slams behind him.

He’s frozen in place in the bathroom, doesn’t know why he lingers, but as the seconds tick by, he hears a soft noise through the door of John Winchester’s room. Castiel creeps out and pads through the stained carpet. He hovers just outside the closed door, just long enough to confirm what he thinks he hears.

Behind the door, John Winchester weeps.

“Cas, what are you doing?”

Castiel’s head snaps back and he sees Dean behind him.

“Your dad –”

“Screw him,” Dean says, “Come on, dumbass. Get back here.”

Castiel obeys and treks after Dean, who closes the bedroom door and locks it as soon as they’re both safely inside. Dean parks himself on the edge of the mattress on the lower bunk. Castiel sits beside him, kneeling in the sheets, faded Mickey Mouse sheets that have seen much better days. He dabs the wet toilet paper over the cut on Dean’s head, wiping away where the flow of blood has dried.

“Good as new,” Castiel says when he finishes. He throws the wad of toilet paper, now pink with
blood, into the overflowing wastebasket across the tiny bedroom.

He watches Dean climb up onto the top bunk. His gut is a mixture of worry-sick and relief, because Dean is okay, Dean is here, he is safe…but Dean cried, Dean bled, and Dean was furious. This means Dean probably doesn’t want him here, just wants to be alone with his little brother and wants to be given space to collect his thoughts.

But as Castiel navigates over discarded shoes and dirty laundry toward the still-open window, Dean says, “Hey, wait.”

“Yes?” Castiel says.

“Stay,” Dean tell him. He scoots onto his stomach and peers over the edge of the top bunk, green eyes serious under knit brows. He clears his throat and repeats, “…Stay.”

“Okay,” Cas says, “Let me text Mama.” He flips out his cellphone, a cheap pay-by-month cell that Mama gave him after he got grounded the first time, and sends a quick message.

At Dean’s. He needs me to stay.

Missouri answers only instants later, be good sugar.

Will do, Castiel sends.

“Come up here,” Dean says, and pats the space on the mattress beside him.

Castiel doesn’t question it. He just climbs up the rickety metal frame of the bunk bed and lands beside Dean. There isn’t much room on the twin mattress, especially for two teenage boys, but there isn’t any other place for him to sleep. He presses up against Dean’s back, kicking off his sneakers and letting them drop off of the edge of the mattress.

“Can you get the light, Sammy?” Dean mumbles.

“Kay,” Sam says. Darkness floods the room, and a quiet broken by Sam rustling around, tripping over litter on the bedroom floor, and the squeak of the mattress as he lands on it. Then Sam says, “Goodnight Dean, goodnight Cas.”

“Night, Sammy,” Dean says.

Cas adds, “Sleep well.”

Sam shifts, trying to get comfortable, but Dean and Castiel remain glued together in the same position. Under Castiel’s arm, he can feel Dean’s chest move up and down with his breath. The smell of his soap and of blood fill Castiel’s nose. It’s a comforting smell, the smell of Dean. His best friend. And with Dean in his arms, he knows that Dean is safe.

Below them, Sam starts to snore.

Dean twitches just a little at the noise and shifts.

“Cas?” his chest rumbles under Cas’ arm as he speaks.

“Hmm.”

“Thanks,” Dean says.
You Must Take Great Care

Chapter Notes

Warning for slight non-con-ish scene (not between Dean and Cas).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Track: Never Play with Scratches – Ruckus Roboticus

You Must Take Great Care

There’s a crick in his neck and his toes are cold.

But holy crap, there is a boner right up against his hip.

Castiel makes a muffled noise and whispers, “Dean.”

Dean makes a soft noise in his sleep and shifts, but instead of moving away from Castiel, he rolls into him. An arm lays heavy across Castiel’s ribcage, the weight and the heat of Dean’s body combining to make him hot under his skin. He’s not hard, but he is dangerously close to getting there. Cas jostles Dean’s shoulder and murmurs, “Dean, come on.”

“No,” Dean mumbles, and tightens his grip.

“Dean,” Castiel protests, “Your dick is digging into my side.”

That does the trick. Dean flies back away from Cas, as far as he can. Granted, this is not far, as the twin mattress doesn’t allow for much space in the first place. His cheeks color and he scrapes a hand through his bedhead. He sighs, “Holy shit, sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Cas assures him.

“No, dude, ugh. My junk was like. All up on you. You didn’t ask for that,” Dean groans, “God, that’s fucking embarrassing.”

“Calm down. It’s just an erection,” Cas says, and then smirks, “Have a nice dream?”

Dean reddens just a little more and smacks Cas’ arm. He complains, “Aw, shut up, you pervert.”

Castiel considers teasing him for the flush creeping up his neck or the way that his pupils are blown wide, but Dean being turned on over his dream (probably something Cassie or Lisa related) has him flustered, too. Cas is simply better at disguising it. Thus he remains silent, and checks the cracked face of his wristwatch. It’s almost five thirty in the morning. If he leaves now, he can make it back to his room to change before he has to catch the bus for school.

“I should probably head out,” Cas says.

Dean snatches Cas’ hand and pulls his wrist toward him. He grunts and rubs the crust of sleep out of his eyes before he gives Cas’ hand back and says, “My dad’s still on shift at the station, so you can use the front door. Let me walk you out.”
They slide from the top bunk and toe carefully to avoid waking Sam while Castiel retrieves his sneakers. The trailer is morning-quiet, filled with dim light from the sunrise. If Castiel hadn’t overheard what happened between Dean and his father last night, and the subsequent emotion from both of them, he would call the trailer peaceful. But when they tread into the living area, a microwave dinner and two cans of soda lay overturned on the carpet, and the secondhand coffee table is out of place and crooked. A dark brown stain of blood sticks to the edge of the table, just at the corner.

Dean catches Castiel staring and says, “You can’t say anything, okay? They’ll take me away from Sammy and I don’t want that.”

“I won’t,” Castiel promises.

Thick relief melts over Dean’s face like syrup. His eyes shutter closed and he swallows before he dares to look back at Cas. He thumps Cas on the shoulder before they go in for a “man hug” and says, “Thanks. You know. For not snitching. And uh, for staying last night. I owe you one.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” Cas says back, “We’re friends. It’s what we’re supposed to do.”

A trace of a smile touches Dean’s lips and he glances down at their feet, Castiel’s laced back into his shoes, and Dean’s bare, toes scrunching into the carpet. He mumbles, “You’re somethin’ else, Cas,” and lifts that smile to grin full-force at him before he says, “Go on. Get outta here, dummy.”

The air outside feels cool on Castiel’s skin, though the heat from the sun that crests over the horizon warms the back of his neck. He shoves his cold fingers into the pockets of his hoodie and smiles at Mr. Singer as he passes by the front office. Bobby, as usual, is awake before anybody should be, tending to the outside of the park office. Today he has his fingers deep in one of the window boxes, turning the soil for new flowers to be planted.

“Good morning, Mr. Singer,” Castiel greets.

“Morning, boy,” he says, and waves one dirt-encrusted gardening glove at him to come over. Castiel does, because it’s Bobby and he doesn’t know anybody but Dean who doesn’t listen to Bobby. Bobby cocks his head in the direction of the Winchester trailer and asks, “You comin’ back from Dean’s?”

“Yes, sir,” Castiel answers.

Bobby harumphs and says, “Thought so. Hey, you treat that kid right, you hear me? Boy needs someone to love him good.”

“Oh, um,” Castiel feels his face heat, “It’s not like that.”

Bobby’s thick brows sail right up under the brim of his faded baseball cap and he says, “Sure it ain’t.”

“It isn’t –”

“Don’t argue with me, boy,” Bobby replies, “Just treat him good, okay?”

An argument sits poised on the tip of Castiel’s tongue, but he knows he won’t get out of here until he agrees with Bobby. So he concedes, “Okay, sir.”

Bobby nods and claps him on the shoulder with his dirty glove.
“That’s what I like to hear,” he says, “Now shoo.”

Castiel hastens back to the boys’ home. He doesn’t have time to shower if he wants breakfast, so he applies extra deodorant and swaps out his dirty clothes for a fresh set. Like yesterday, he applies eyeliner around his eyes, even though there’s some leftover on his face from the day before, and tucks the stubby pencil into the pocket of his jeans.

Headphones in his ears and granola bar halfway out of his mouth, he heads out to the bus stop. Cassie is already there, though she doesn’t really talk to Castiel anymore. So is Kali, who’s started to treat him like he exists, probably because she likes Gabriel more than she’s willing to let on, and Gabriel likes Castiel more than he’s willing to let on.

Dean makes it to the stop just as the bus screeches around the corner, panting. They board last, together, and take the seats across from where Crowley is. Castiel waves, and though Crowley sees him, he doesn’t wave back.

He’s okay with that, he finds.

The end of March comes marked with a rainstorm, ironclad clouds thick in the sky, the whole world dark as students drift from class to class, all ready for the coming of the end of the year. The seniors, certainly, have been absent more than necessary, which Dean suggests may be in preparation for this year’s senior prank. This leads to an excited discussion between Meg and Dean about what their year’s senior prank should be. Castiel tunes it out, just happy to be with his friends, though he thinks the prank they have in mind involves a cow. Or perhaps more than one cow.

Castiel hasn’t been over to Crowley’s for weeks now, instead hanging around Dean as much as he used to before Dean and Cassie began dating. Some days they like to go by their old fort, which is dilapidated after the snows in winter, and mess around by the creek. Other days, they stay in. Those days are Castiel’s favorite, because they do the same things they would do if the other wasn’t there – but together. Castiel sketches and draws, and Dean strums on his guitar. He’s much better with the instrument than he used to be, and Castiel loves to listen to him while he works in his sketchbook, the stray plucks and murmured lyrics the perfect kind of music for art.

So it takes Castiel by surprise when Crowley corners him in the downstairs boys’ bathroom during their lunch period. He appears behind him when Castiel is checking on his eyeliner (it looks like shit. How does Anna do this every day?).

“Hello, darling,” he greets.

“Holy hell, Crowley,” Castiel gets out, “You frightened me.”

“Yes, well. Apologies,” he says, “Would you like to join me tonight at my house?”

Castiel lifts a brow, “Like, hang out? Or fuck?”

Crowley makes a face, “I don’t see the difference.”

In all honesty, Castiel has been horny. With a mobile home full of boys and a single bathroom, it’s hard to find time to himself to masturbate. He’s had at least three close calls of Gabriel walking in on him with his hand wrapped around his own cock, and one occasion on which he did walk in on Castiel. He had lifted his brows and walked right out of the bathroom after, but that didn’t make the incident any less embarrassing.
Besides, masturbation just can’t compare to being well-fucked.

Especially since Castiel refuses to play with his own ass when he could be caught at any moment.

“I suppose that does sound nice,” Castiel replies.

“Excellent,” Crowley says, and they leave it at that.

At the end of the day, Castiel still sits with Dean on the bus, though he tells him he’s going home with Crowley. Dean is quieter after that, but smiles when they come to a stop outside Sugar Lane, and waves goodbye to him when he steps out. There, Castiel switches to sit beside Crowley, whose expression suggests a blacker mood than their bathroom encounter implied.

They don’t speak while they walk from the bus stop to Crowley’s house. That in itself isn’t unusual, while Castiel isn’t the most graceful at picking up on social cues, he would swear that the silence is different.

At the front door they shed their shoes and place them on the shoe rack, and in Crowley’s bedroom they let their school belongings fall to the carpet with a thunk, thunk.

“Get naked,” Crowley instructs in a clipped voice, and who is Castiel to disobey? He pulls off his clothes clinically, item by item, until he’s down to his underwear. Crowley assesses him, looks him up and down, and then adds to his command, “The underwear too.”

Castiel shrugs out of them, and climbs up onto Crowley’s large, plush bed. Crowley vanishes into his walk-in closet, and when he returns, he holds a black tie in each hand. He cocks his brow at Castiel, a request for his consent, he thinks – and so he just nods. Dean shouldn’t be the only one allowed to experiment sexually, he figures. And if nothing else, he’ll get a good story out of being tied up and fucked by Fergus Crowley.

The bedposts are cold and hard against the skin of Castiel’s wrists, and the silk ties are tight. Too tight, he thinks, but he doesn’t say that. Maybe he’ll even get a little thrill out of the pain.

“Exquisite,” Crowley drawls, standing at the foot of the bed to admire his work. Something about the touch of the silk ties and being exposed already has Castiel half-hard against his abdomen. Nerves tingle through him, though Crowley’s compliment reassures him that this is good. He’s needed this, needed it for a while now.

Crowley doesn’t get naked for a long time. His t-shirt hugs the soft curve of his belly as he inches over the mattress. He worships Castiel’s body with his hands. At first he uses gentle touches, and then he’s harder, scratching his neatly clipped nails over sensitive skin, pinching at Castiel’s nipples until they’re pebbled and red, sinking his teeth in when he latches his lips to Castiel’s throat to kiss. He leaves marks everywhere, red and pink, some sure to be dark bruises by the end of the night, silent stories of the experimentation.

Some of his harder touches hurt. Castiel whines and squirms, but the ties fastened around his wrists keep him in place, and Crowley’s weight on his legs prevent those from moving too.

As Crowley draws back to undress, the gray-black clouds outside split open and belch out rain. It hits the glass of the bedroom window with a pang-pang-pang-pang, like distant gunfire.

Crowley, as always, looks nice naked. Castiel tells him so and he lets out a soft huff, barely detectable, like he doesn’t believe the words. He’s soft-bodied and serious-faced, and his cock is thick and lovely. It’s a picture that Castiel has indulged in while getting himself off once or twice – Crowley in the nude, edging closer toward him over the mattress.
There’s lube in his hand now, and his hands are rough again, prying Castiel’s legs apart and nudging wet fingers in between the cheeks on his ass. He presses two thick fingers inside him to start. It burns, worse than Castiel expected it to, though he supposes the pain makes sense since he hasn’t slept with anyone for quite some time. He makes a noise of complaint, but Crowley holds him down, keeps working him open with vicious thrusts and a look of concentration on his face.

“Go easy,” Castiel complains, but Crowley doesn’t listen.

He withdraws his hand and rips open a condom packet.

“That wasn’t enough, Crowley,” Castiel insists, and jerks at the ties around his wrists, “You only had two fingers in me. It’s gonna – fuck.”

Crowley presses inside him. He’s too thick, too big, and Castiel doesn’t like this. He doesn’t like it at all. He tries to make himself relax into the mattress, settle down as Crowley spears him. But his body doesn’t obey – he’s tense, and he hurts, too full. The hard-on that he had from Crowley’s touches is gone, and his cock now sits soft against his belly.

“Too much,” Castiel says, eyes burning and cheeks flaring with embarrassment.

“Shh,” Crowley returns, and presses a finger down on his lips, “You’re mine. So beautiful, all mine.”

“I’m not –” Castiel protests, and a pained noise rips from his throat when Crowley sharply bucks into him.

And that’s it. He’s done. This isn’t fun anymore, and it’s not an experiment anymore. The results are in, and Castiel does not like any of this. He kicks at Crowley and says, “Stop! Get off of me. I don’t like this.”

Inside him, Crowley stills. Something in Castiel’s face must tell him he’s telling the truth, that he’s not just playing along with something kinky and investigational. He pulls out with a deep, deep scowl and undoes the tie on one of Castiel’s wrists.

Castiel scrambles to undo the other and demands, “What the hell? Why didn’t you listen to me?” He yanks his underwear back over his hips and thrusts each leg into his jeans.

“You,” Crowley says, and then stops. He pulls his t-shirt back over his head and then continues, “You pine away for that Winchester kid. You want him so badly, and you ignore everyone else. It’s pathetic, you know. How much you want him, and how much he doesn’t want you. He’s straight, you moron.”

Castiel flushes with anger. He snaps, “You think I don’t know that?”

“Then why do you do it?” Crowley yells, “I’m the one that’s here. I’m the one that fucks you like you need, you little slut. I’m the one that takes you to bed and I’m the one that gives you all the dick you want. But you still go crawling after him like he hung the fucking moon, as though –”

“Shut up!” Castiel barks, “It isn’t like that. We’re not like that. Not Dean and me, and not you and me, either. Dean’s my best friend, and – and this – this is just sex! It’s not like I care about you or anything like that. It’s physical, and you don’t –”

A growl rips from Crowley’s lips, and he launches at Castiel. He slams him back up against the wall, and the pain reverberates through Castiel’s whole body, from his sore ass to his bruised wrists. Crowley bites out, “You’re so oblivious, so stupid. I can hardly believe I ever thought this would be a good idea. You may look beautiful with your legs spread, but you’re still a brainless little bitch.”
“Fuck you,” Castiel says. He shoves Crowley off of him and grabs for his backpack. He abandons his socks in Crowley’s bedroom and pounds down the stairs, the jostle of each step hurting him. He doesn’t care. He shoves his bare feet into his tennis shoes.

“Where are you going?” demands Crowley, trailing behind him in nothing more than his boxer briefs and t-shirt, “You don’t have any way to get home, idiot.”

“I’m walking,” Castiel spits.

“Your shitty little trailer park is miles away,” Crowley says, “It’s raining.”

“I don’t care,” Castiel says, “You’re an asshole and I’m leaving.”

“Fine!” Crowley shouts, “See if I care if you walk home and die!”

Those are the last words that Castiel hears before he slams the front door and jogs away from Crowley’s house.

Rain pounds down on his shoulders. In instants, he’s wet. It’s dark outside from the storm, and he doesn’t know where he’s going, but he walks. He walks down through the winding suburban roads of Crowley’s well-off neighborhood until he breaks free from the big houses and pristine lawns, standing now out on some unfamiliar road. The lit headlights of cars are barely visible through the muck of rain as he treads along on the sidewalk.

Castiel shivers.

Every time he takes a step, his body hurts. Rainwater squelches inside his sneakers. He can feel the skin of his bare toes pruning as he limps along.

He has no idea where he is. He doesn’t drive, doesn’t pay attention to the world outside when the bus transports them from stop to stop. Hell, he doesn’t even know if he’s going in the right direction. He’s far from home and he’s alone, and though that’s not a new feeling to him the realization settles like a cold stone in his chest.

It’s an hour before Castiel reluctantly pulls out his phone. He stares at Dean’s contact on the screen for a long moment before he presses send and lets the call go through.

“Hey Cas,” Dean answers.

Castiel’s teeth chatter as he replies, “Um. H-Hello, Dean.”

“Whoa, what’s up? You okay, dude?” Dean asks.

“N-No,” Cas responds, “I don’t know where I-I am. I don’t…”

“It’s okay,” Dean says, and there’s a rustle on the other end, “I’ll come get you. Just find the nearest cross-street, okay? And tell me what it is.”

Castiel walks a little further, a few minutes of silence passing between them on the phone as he does. He hears Dean start the Impala, engine purring under his touch. He stops at the closest stoplight and reads off the names of the roads.

“Oh,” Dean says, “I know where you are. Just…don’t move, all right? Do you want me to stay on the phone?”

“No,” Castiel says, “J-Just concentrate on driving. I’ll stay here.”
“All right. See you soon.”

Each minute under the rain that Dean doesn’t show is painful. Castiel trembles and shakes, teeth clacking together despite his best efforts to keep still. He hurts so much right now, and he’s so exhausted that he just wants to collapse. He fantasizes about his bed, about being dry and in pajamas and wrapped in a blanket. He thinks of Mama Missouri’s quilts and how she makes all her foster kids hot cocoa when it’s cold out. For a second he thinks he might cry, but instead he’s just angry.

The Impala pulls up next to Castiel almost twenty minutes after he calls Dean. He opens the door and climbs in, where Dean’s laid out some towels over the seat.

“Holy shit, dude, are you all right?” Dean asks.

Cas answers honestly, “No,” and keeps shaking. Dean blasts the heat for him, but it doesn’t help much with his sopping clothes still stuck to his skin.

“What happened?” Dean asks.

“I d-don’t know,” Cas says, “Crowley was rough and I told him to stop and we fought and I…I don’t know.”

At a stoplight, Dean sheds his jacket and offers it to Castiel. He makes a move to refuse it, but the look on Dean’s face says business, so he accepts the leather coat and shrugs it over his shoulders. The coat smells like Dean, like masculine body wash and hair gel, and encases him in the warmth from Dean’s body.

The sign at the entrance of Sugar Lane grants Castiel a sense of relief, knowing that he’s home. It should probably scare him that he thinks of this place as home, but he can’t be bothered to indulge his paranoia in the wake of his happiness. Dean parks outside of the boys’ home and hustles him inside through the downpour.

“Jesus, what happened to you two?” Gabriel asks when the front door swings shut behind them. He sits on their couch with his laptop perched on his legs, one headphone in his ear.

Dean makes a slicing motion across his throat with his hand and wraps one arm around Castiel, steering him toward the bathroom. Castiel tries to pull off his wet clothes but can’t with his hands shaking so much, and so Dean reaches and helps him. He doesn’t even blink, expression unchanging, as Castiel stands naked before him.

Until he takes in all the bruises.

“Fuck,” Dean says, “What did he do?”

“He was just rough,” Castiel says.

“’Just rough’? Cas, your wrists,” he says, and pulls them up to look at them.

“Yes, well. It seemed like an interesting turn of events at the time,” Castiel says.

“Oh, that’s messed up,” Dean says, “But he stopped, right?”

Cas nods.

“Okay, good. ‘Cause if he didn’t I would have to kick his ass. I might kick his ass anyway. What the hell? Where does he get off doing this to you?” Dean demands.
“He was mad at me,” Castiel says, “I don’t want to talk about it, Dean. May I please shower now?”

Dean gives Castiel a look of serious consideration, and for a moment Castiel thinks he won’t leave and let him shower in peace. But then he affords a curt nod and says, “I’m stickin’ around,” before he exits the bathroom.

The warm water heats Castiel’s freezing skin and makes him feel clean again. He hurts everywhere and doesn’t want to stand, so he doesn’t stay under the stream of water for long before he shuts the shower off and dries the moisture from his skin. He pads into his bedroom, where Andy is asleep with headphones in his ears and Zeke is awake and playing on his Gameboy Advance on the bunk above Castiel’s. He lifts a hand in greeting, but if he notices the bruises littering Castiel’s skin, he doesn’t say so.

When Castiel emerges in pajamas and thick socks, he smells food.

Dean stands in the kitchen over a pot, and when he hears Castiel enter behind him, he turns and smiles. He says, “I’m makin’ you the Winchester specialty. Tomato rice soup. You go sit your ass down on the couch and pick a movie or something. This’ll be done in like a half hour.”

“Are you sure you don’t want help?” Castiel asks.


“Well, okay.” Castiel says, hands up in defense. He turns and pads into the living room, where Gabe still sits, and sifts through the collection of DVDs and VHS tapes they have organized on a cinderblock-and-plank set of shelves. The television in the boys’ home isn’t as nice as the one that Missouri has in her home in the den, but it serves its purpose. Castiel chooses Indiana Jones, because he knows that Dean likes it, and retreats back to the couch to sit beside Gabe, where he pulls a blanket around his shoulders.

“You look like shit,” Gabriel mentions.

“Thanks.”

“You all right?” Gabe ventures.

“I’ll be fine,” Castiel says shortly.

“But you’re not fine now,” concludes Gabriel.

Castiel shakes his head. He’s not okay. He doesn’t know what happened, or what went wrong. Crowley has no right to be angry with him, and he hurt him. His ass aches something awful and it’s hard to find a comfortable position to sit in as the movie starts, because every way that he settles sends sparks of pain up the base of his spine.

Gabriel looks like he might ask about the pain and about Castiel’s restless shifting, but Dean rescues them from that awkward conversation, bringing in two plastic bowls of steaming food. The soup smells amazing, and the first bite sends tendrils of warm curling into his gut and through his limbs. Dean watches him carefully as he swallows, and asks, “Good?”

“It’s wonderful. Thank you, Dean,” Castiel politely says.

Dean smiles and his green eyes crinkle at the corners. He says, “Good. My mom used to make it for me, before. You know.”
Before she was murdered.

As always happens with any conversation involving Mary Winchester, Castiel wants to ask what happened, but knows that can’t. Talking about Mary hurts Dean, and he systematically refuses to hurt his best friend in any way, shape, or form.

Between slurps of soup, Dean compliments Castiel’s choice of movie. He preens under the attention, words he knows are genuine, because they’re from Dean. He has to wonder if all the things that Crowley said to him were lies, just because he wanted a warm body to stick his dick into. Maybe he isn’t really beautiful or exquisite. Maybe he’s just as ordinary as he’s always been.

“Am I attractive?” he finally asks, when he can’t hold the words in anymore.

“Bucko, you are a stud,” Gabriel says, and winks at him.

Cas rolls his eyes and shove at him. He says, “I mean it. Crowley said a lot of nice things to me, but I think he just said them because he wanted sex. I don’t know. I’m probably being frivolous. I just wanted to know.”

Dean says, “Dude, you’re totally a catch. Don’t worry about that douchenozzle Crowley. Any guy would be lucky to be with you, and you know it.”

Castiel brightens, a flower of warmth unfurling at those words being spoken in Dean’s voice. He asks, just to be sure, “Do you really think so?”

“I know so,” Dean says with finality.

He doesn’t ask about it anymore after that, and lets Dean take his empty soup bowl from him back to the little kitchen as the movie plays on their TV. When Dean comes back and settles on Castiel’s left side, he drapes his arm over the back of the couch and lets Cas rest his head against him.

Castiel is pretty sure he has the most wonderful best friend in the whole world.

Chapter End Notes

****Please note that Crowley is not meant to be characterized as 100% evil and I still have plans for him. Don’t fear!
April becomes May, the seniors leave Smoky Bluff, Sam turns twelve, and in a short matter of days, Castiel realizes that the school year is poised to come to an end. His final grades will all be Bs and high Cs, with the exception of his freshman art class – that, he’s passing with flying colors.

As comfortable as this year has been, he’s ready for summer. School makes his skin itch with the need to get out, and with his incident with Crowley has come a fresh wave of bullying too subtle to report to anybody. Crowley shoves him out of the way and makes him trip in the hallway when it’s full of students. Sometimes he makes fun of him – for his ratty clothes, his cheap shoes, his poorly-applied eyeliner – just loudly enough for Castiel to hear, while quiet enough that it’s only Castiel that hears him, in the end.

Castiel fires back as much as he can without getting caught. During one lunch break, he and Meg slip into their respectively gendered bathrooms (the GSA’s current crusade is to get a couple of gender-neutral bathrooms installed. Charlie reports that the school board is near relenting) and write on the walls FERGUS CROWLEY HAS A TINY DICK. Castiel decorates his bathroom graffiti with a sharpie picture of a penis and draws a smiley face on it. He chuckles all the way back to their table.

But even if he does get a jab in from time to time, he’s ready for the reprieve from homework and his own social awkwardness. Having shot up five inches this year has his body stretched like taffy, tall and thin and not quite shaped like it’s supposed to be yet.

He wants warm days by the creek with Dean and nighttime joyrides in the Impala. He wants slumber parties with Charlie, sharing popsicles and Kool-Aid in Mama’s kitchen with the Winchester boys. He wants the kind of idyllic summer that he reads about in his books, the kind of summer that he can lock up in his chest of treasured memories so that when they finally make him leave here, he won’t forget how much he loved it.

No matter what kind of place the next home they stick him in will be (maybe he’ll just end up in a boys’ home for good this time), he has this place to look back on.

He says this to Dean over cheap beer by the creek, one Saturday in late May. He covered himself in bug spray before they walked here, but already he’s scratching a mosquito bite at the exposed skin between where the leg of his jeans rides up and the tops of his socks end. The warmth of the late spring evening has Dean and Castiel sitting on their jackets on the ground and sweat dotting their foreheads and the backs of their necks.

“Dude,” Dean says, “You’re not leaving here.”

“Dean,” Castiel replies, voice gentle, “I don’t want to leave, but it’s gonna happen.”
“I’m fucking serious,” Dean says, “I’ll hunt you down, kidnap you, bail you out Indiana Jones style
with like a whip and a sweet hat or some shit –”

“Dean.”

“And we’ll bust outta here, hit the road. I told you that,” Dean says. He pulls Castiel in with an arm
around his shoulders, holds their bodies close together. This close he can smell the sweat and dirt on
Dean’s skin and the beer on his breath, the cheap shampoo and gel in his hair, all the good things that
make Dean – Dean.

Dean’s looking at him with heavy-lidded eyes. The fabric of his Led Zeppelin t-shirt is soft against
Castiel’s skin as he shifts to look at him. This is – this is almost a kiss. He feels each exhale from
Dean’s lips against his cheek, is so close he can tell that Dean needs to shave and smell the sharp
scent of Clearasil face wash. Their lips are centimeters from touching. Dean’s tongue slides over his
lips and wets over the chapped skin.

Castiel’s heart pumps blood through his body, hard.

When he breathes out against Dean’s mouth, Dean draws back.

Castiel’s stomach plummets. He knew it was true good to be true.

“Dean –” he starts, an apology on his lips.

“I’ve got an idea,” Dean cuts him off, a grin on his face. He claps Castiel on the shoulder and then
stands up, sliding his cellphone out of the pocket of his jeans. He explains, “I’m gonna call and see if
this’ll work.”

“If what will work?” Castiel asks, and climbs to his feet to follow.

Dean waves him off and holds the phone against the shell of his ear. Castiel can’t hear the voice on
the other end, but Dean says, “Hey-o, man. Listen, I need a favor. You free to do some work
See you.”

“What was that?” asks Castiel, “What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise,” Dean says, and musses Castiel’s hair.

Cas shoves him off, laughing and asks, “Seriously, Dean. What are we doing?”

“It’s a surprise,” Dean emphasizes, “It’ll be cool, cross my heart.”

John is on shift at the station and Sam at the movies with his best friend Ruby, so they’re in the clear
to nab the Impala and take it to Dean’s undisclosed destination. Dean’s freshly minted summer mix
tape sends AC/DC into the air, filling the silence between them with guitar riffs and good music.
Castiel tries not to stare at Dean too much, but he ends up doing just that anyway, watching his spit-
slick lips mouth along the words of the song.

They steer into a part of town that Castiel has never been to before, a slightly sketchy neighborhood
a few minutes away from the KU campus, lined with thrift shops, bars pulsing with college-age kids,
and smoke shops with giant hookahs and colorful glass pipes arranged in the display windows. Dean
parallel parks outside a small convenience store that advertises stocking cheap cigarettes and a spread
of beers.
The milling college students hopping from bar to bar and hipster girls in floral rompers and thick-framed glasses make Castiel feel young, like he’s not supposed to be here. Beside him, Dean strides with confidence down the walk, grinning at girls like he always does, even if the girls are definitely years older than he is. He knows Dean isn’t all smiles and swagger, but he does envy the easy confidence that he radiates.

Dean stops in front of a small shop with cursive neon letters that read Physical Graffiti Tattoo. He shoots a glance at Dean and says, “What are we doing?”

“You’ll see. C’mon,” Dean jerks his head at the shop door and pushes it open. A bell jingles to announce their arrival, a tinkling noise that seems out of place at nine o’clock at night.

“Hey brother,” he hears, a deep Louisiana drawl has Castiel lifting his eyes from the floor, eyes searching for the source. A burly-bear like man is the source of the voice, a cap on his head and a smile on his face. He greets Dean with a slap of hands and a fist to fist, followed by a “man hug.”

“Benny, this is my best friend Cas,” Dean says, sticking his thumb back at Castiel, “Cas, this is my tattoo artist Benny.”

“Isn’t that illegal?” Castiel asks, “We’re not old enough.”

Benny waves his hand at Dean and Cas. He says, “Dean’s daddy put away the guy that shot my wife. I owe the Winchesters favors for the rest a’ my life, and if givin’ Dean some ink is all I gotta do, then that’s fine by me. So what’re you lookin’ at getting tonight, boys?”

Dean holds up his wrist, where braided leather rests, the silver anti-possession charm dangling. He says, “Can we get something like this?”

Benny grips Dean’s wrist and lifts the charm toward the light by his fingertip. He says, “All right, I can do that.”

“Is this like… a friendship tattoo?” Castiel finally asks.

Dean looks back and nods, “You keep worrying about having to leave and all that crap. Figure this’ll help you never forget I got your back. And you got mine too, right?”

“Of course I have your back,” Castiel softly answers.

“Good,” nods Dean, “Then let’s do this thing.”

Benny takes them back to his station. Dean volunteers to go first, pulling his black t-shirt up over his head. Only then does Castiel realize it’s the first time that he’s seen Dean without a shirt. He tries not to blush and fails, miserable, looking up and down Dean’s lithe torso. His shoulders are freckled and broad, stretching into slim sinewy arms. The gentle V of his hip bones dips into the elastic band of his underwear, out of which the dark lines of a tattoo curl upward – a dark-eyed crow stares at Castiel through ink eyes.

“Her name’s Zeppelin,” Dean says when he catches Castiel staring, and winks.

“Your crow tattoo has a name?” Castiel asks.

“A’course she does,” he says.

Dean indicates to Benny that he wants the tattoo over his heart. Castiel licks his lips and tries not to look too hard at Dean, tries not to let on how much it means to him to hear that he wants a tattoo with
Castiel right above the organ that pumps blood through his body and keeps him alive on the basest level.

The idea that somebody cares that much about him, even if it’s not the kissing and sex kind of caring, makes his chest swell up so much that it hurts to breathe. All his life, until last July, Castiel was an afterthought. To most he was a paycheck, to some he was a project, to others he was a show of goodwill, at least until he pissed them off in one way or another.

And in the worst places, he was a punching bag, a release for a foster parent’s anger. He remembers being twelve and terrified of his foster father, a huge man with a bush of dark red facial hair and a beer gut. He liked order in his life – from his wife and from the foster children they took in. If the man didn’t see the order he wanted, all of them suffered. Castiel strived his best to please every family he went to, but once – and only once – he made the man madder than he’d ever seen him before. One of the younger kids, a new boy named Peter, wet his bed after a nightmare. Their foster father raged, and Castiel stepped between them.

That step between Peter and their foster father earned him a dark, mottled bruise along the side of his face and two blackened eyes. Two cracked ribs made each breath of his rattle, and aggravated his asthma.

He ran away, taking the few material items with him and disappearing away from that terrible place.

He ran away, and no one came looking for him.

For four and a half weeks, he was homeless. He found a place below an underpass where homeless kids gathered, after walking for miles. His shins and feet ached with the effort of his escape, and the other kids were okay. One teenage girl with tangled hair and eyes too big for her face shared her food with him until he learned to steal his own, and let him sleep beside her. He never learned her name.

It all came to an end when Victor went to his old home and found out that he’d been missing. Victor is many things, hardened and succinct, occasionally intimidating and always passionate. Among those things is and always has been the ability to find. He found Castiel at the underpass with his hair matted from weeks without a bath, belly empty from over twenty four hours without food, and shivering from the cold. Castiel went with him, because he didn’t know how to do anything else.

Being there, homeless and reeking of weeks without a bar of soap, and being here, warm and with a friend that wants to mark his loyalty to Castiel permanently onto the body, is a jarring difference.

He watches without speaking as Benny cleans and shaves the area. Before he makes up a sketch, Castiel says, “Wait. I have an idea.”

“Well, shoot,” Benny says.

“Could we,” Castiel says, “Could we have a banner under the star? It could… it could say something like – like semper amici. That means ‘always friends.’ Or… we could shorten it to semper ami. Kind of like the Marines and semper fi.” Latin class has been good for something, it turns out.

A new smile, a different smile than Dean’s flirting smile or joking smile, eases onto Dean’s face. He nods and says, “I like that. Then we’re like, brothers in arms or something.”

"Yeah," Cas agrees, a shy smile finding its way onto his face despite himself. Dean and Castiel, brothers in arms. Yeah, that sounds perfect to him. He'll never admit it to Dean, of course, but the idea that he would leave and that Dean would forget about him fades with this new plan, and
something different hatches in the wake of impermanence. He feels like he wants to be like this forever.

“All right, brother, you spell that out for me and I’ll put this together,” Benny says. Castiel scrawls semper ami onto a piece of paper and passes it to Benny.

After Benny makes the sketch and applies the outline to the clean space above Dean’s heart, the reality of it hits Castiel. Dean is getting a tattoo for him, and he’s going to get a tattoo for Dean. This is his best friend, the friend that has been there every moment that Castiel needed somebody to be there for him. He does things like take Castiel to drive-in movies and make him tomato rice soup from a recipe that belonged to his dead mother. He cares, and the weight of that caring should be heavy. It isn’t, though. It makes him feel like he can fly. The weight of Dean’s friendship is like wings on his back.

The buzz of Benny’s needle makes Castiel nervous, but Dean just looks pleased, smiling and barely wincing when the needle strikes a sensitive place in his skin. It doesn’t take Benny long to get the tattoo finished. It’s a small thing, and the only shading is within the banner underneath the symbol. At the end of the process, Benny washes blood and ink off of Dean’s pink, irritated skin, and applies salves before he tapes a bandage on. Dean slides his shirt back over his head, and Castiel mourns the loss of sight of Dean’s bare chest.

“Your turn,” Benny says. Castiel swallows and pulls up his own t-shirt, the Ravenclaw shirt that Charlie gave him for his birthday. He’s thinner than Dean but his skin is a little tanner. The only freckle he has is a single one above his right nipple.

“You want your ink in the same place?” Benny asks.

Castiel glances at Dean, who’s still smiling, and nods. “Yes, please,” he says.

Benny repeats the process on Castiel – cleaning, shaving, applying the outline and letting him look in the mirror to make sure that he likes the position. Then there’s a small, plastic container of black ink, and Benny’s wearing a fresh pair of gloves.

“Relax, brother,” Benny says, “Dean, c’mover here and hold your boy’s hand.”

“I’m not his boy,” Castiel replies pointedly.

Benny snorts and says, “Sure you ain’t,” but Castiel doesn’t have time to ask what he means by that before the noise of the needle splits the air, and it touches down on Castiel’s skin. Dean obeys Benny and stands beside Cas, though he doesn’t make a move to hold Castiel’s hand until Cas offers it up. He closes his fingers around Castiel’s, and his hand is warm, reassuring. It’s a stark contrast to the sting in his skin.

Getting tattooed is a weird sensation, and not a sensation Castiel expected to feel at fifteen and a half years old. It’s not too painful. He’s experienced pain before and this settles somewhere in the realm of basic discomfort, like having to wake up early after a night of poor sleep, or being stuck someplace for a long time and needing to pee all the way through it. The only time that pain surfaces is when Benny strikes close to bone, and then Castiel feels as though he’s being rattled.

Dean gives Castiel a smile all the way through, and they talk about how surprised Charlie is going to be when they show her.

“All finished,” Benny says. Only then does Castiel realize that he spent the entire tattooing process looking up at Dean. He’s such a sap, he thinks, a doomed sap.
He doesn’t have much money, and even when Benny says that they don’t have to pay for the tattoos, that they’re payment for whatever Dean’s dad did for him, Castiel gives him the money that Mama Missouri gave him for his allowance, and Dean passes over a twenty bill. It’s not a lot, but Benny grins and says they’re “good kids” and tells them to keep their noses clean.

When they arrive back at Sugar Lane, Dean hugs him. He lingers there, with his arms around Cas, or maybe Castiel imagines it. Either way, it’s nice. It’s nice, and he realizes with a desperate pull at his heart that even though he’ll probably leave this place, he never wants to.

X

The rest of the school year slips through Castiel’s fingers, quick as a snap. He ends the year with passable grades and a skip in his step. Charlie’s grades trump his and Dean’s sit firmly at low Cs and Ds, which he doesn’t seem to mind. He just smiles and says it doesn’t matter. Besides, Dean tells them, Bobby’s taking him on as a part-time summer employee at the salvage yard next door to Sugar Lane. He already knows a lot about cars, Castiel knows, because he tells Cas all the things that he and his dad did to fix up the Impala after first purchasing her from Bobby.

Castiel wants to think that it’s strange that John Winchester that works on old cars with his son is the same John Winchester that shouts and leaves bruises on that son’s skin, but he remembers the way that he heard John cry in his bedroom after he and Dean fought the night that Castiel snuck into their trailer. Sometimes John is a storm, violent and destructive.

And sometimes, John works on cars with Dean and cries after he argues with his sons.

Families are an odd thing to become used to.

This lesson comes unexpectedly, when Missouri announces over supper one evening mid-June that Zeke’s father has been released from jail and has proven that he’s capable of caring for his teenage son.

Zeke is leaving their family – Zeke, one of the quieter foster kids of Missouri’s. He’s been Castiel’s sibling for nearly a year and to hear that he’ll leave them is bittersweet. On one hand, he can have the top bunk and there’s one less person that could walk in on him masturbating.

But on the other hand, he’s losing a person that’s been a fixture in his life, quiet fixture as he may have been.

On the day that Zeke leaves, their bedroom feels empty, like a piece of it is missing. The bunk above Castiel’s has had the sheets stripped and tossed into the laundry, and Zeke’s ribbon for winning the Geography Bee no longer sits tacked on the wall. The naked space makes him uneasy.

Everyone, even Raph and little Hester, waits outside Mama’s home with Zeke, whose things are all packed into a duffel that rests at his feet. A beaten up Toyota Corolla rounds the bend into Sugar Lane and pulls to a stop in front of them. Two people get out: a tall man with hardened features that must be Zeke’s dad, and a plump Hispanic woman that Castiel knows is Zeke’s caseworker.

All of the kids hug Zeke, one by one. Castiel doesn’t cry when wraps his arms around his now-former foster brother, but he thinks he might when Zeke throws his arms around Missouri’s neck and says thank you to her, soft spoken as always and eyes damp.

When Zeke’s dad helps him put his duffel in the trunk and Zeke moves to sit in the backseat of the car, Castiel waves goodbye. Zeke waves back, staring at all of them as the Toyota turns around and moves to the exit of the mobile home park. When the car disappears and is swallowed by the noise of
traffic along the road, Castiel looks up at the sky, and hopes that Zeke will be happy.

Dean works a lot that summer, but he’s happy at the salvage yard, so Castiel’s happy, too. When they do get a chance to hang out, Dean usually has engine grease on him, and sometimes hasn’t bothered taking off his jumpsuit. He talks about the pretty girls that come in sometimes to have their cars fixed up cheap, or the cougar that had “a freakin’ sweet Firebird” and gave Dean a blowjob in the women’s restroom while Bobby changed the brake fluid for her.

Mostly, Castiel ends up with Charlie or Meg, watching movies or bumming around in their nice neighborhoods with pretty, manicured lawns. One night, Castiel spends the night at Charlie’s. Her parents order pizza for dinner, and he plays a game of Clue with her family. This leads into a discussion about Clue-the-movie, and Charlie announces that Tim Curry is great in everything, but his greatest role is in Rocky Horror.

When Castiel announces that he has never seen Rocky Horror, Charlie herds him over to sit in front of the TV and slides her copy of the movie into the DVD player.

When Castiel comes home the following afternoon, he sits down in front of the computer in the boys’ home and pirates the entire soundtrack. It’s all that he listens to for a month. Now he knows every word to every song from Rocky Horror Picture Show and he regrets absolutely nothing about that.

Dean teases him about it, even though he’s never seen Rocky Horror Picture Show himself – Charlie keeps meaning to make him sit and watch the movie, but never remembers when they have the chance.

Summer shouldn’t be allowed to pass so quickly. No sooner has it begun than Cas realizes in July that he’s been at Mama Missouri’s for a year now, far, far past anyplace he’s lived but for the first seven years of his life with his hazily-recalled, hyper-religious parents. He wonders if he should feel stagnant. Cas has spent his life moving so much that it became the only way of life that he knew.

But even if he gets sometimes restless, Sugar Lane and Mama Missouri and the Winchester boys mean home. Home, he tells himself, even if he can’t expect that home to last forever. It’s the first home that he’s had and he’ll enjoy that. goddamnit.

He’ll enjoy his home if it kills him.

Dean has sex with Lisa.

Dean has sex with Lisa, and proceeds to describe the event to Castiel in gratuitous detail over an afternoon feast of McDonald’s on the floor of Castiel’s bedroom.

“Did you know she goes to yoga with her mom twice a week?” Dean asks with an enthusiastic wave of his hands, “She’s bendy. It’s the bendiest sex I’ve ever had in my life and it was hot.”

Castiel is jealous. Partially he is jealous because Lisa is beautiful and firm and kind and also apparently bendy, but mostly he’s jealous because she gets to touch that bare chest, gets to count the freckles on Dean’s shoulders and kiss his chapped lips and – be bendy with him. He wishes there was something wrong with Lisa so that he could be mad at her and tell Dean that she’s all wrong for him and that he deserves better, but none of those things are true because Lisa’s actually a very nice
person and if anybody deserves Dean, it’s probably her.

“That’s…lovely, Dean,” Castiel says, and bites into his burger so that he doesn’t have to discuss the subject any further.

“Lovely’s one fuckin’ way to put it, yeah,” Dean laughs, “What about you, dude? You gotten any?”

Castiel swallows his bite of fast food and replies, “No, Dean. I have not gotten any. Crowley was the only sex I ever had and now I don’t know how to talk to boys like a functional human being again.”

“C’mon, what? Why not, Cas?”

“My ‘people skills’ are a little ‘rusty,’” Castiel answers, making air quotes with his fingers. He plucks the last of his fries from the box, smotheres it in a dose of ketchup, and bites into it, satisfied. Mama would probably be horrified that they’re eating fast food when she could make them a perfectly decent sandwich, but sometimes McDonald’s just sounds marvelous, especially when your best friend offers to pay for aforementioned McDonald’s.

“No they aren’t,” Dean says, “People totally like you.”

Castiel lifts a brow to this. The whole room reeks of fast food and teenage boy, and with Dean looking at him like that it all feels a little suffocating. He has to dig his inhaler out of his pocket and dose himself with Albuterol before he has the breath to say, “I’m socially anxious, I say strange things, I make people feel bad if I reveal anything about my background, I’m too blunt, and I – I’m funny-looking.”

“That’s crap,” Dean says.

“Well then how come I don’t see nearly as much dick as you see naked women, hmm?” Castiel asks.

“Dunno. Maybe you should get that phone app. You know, the one for gay dudes.”

“A Grindr? Dean, I’m fifteen.”

“So? Lie.”

“Guys only use it for sex,” he says.

Dean shrugs, “Isn’t that just what you said you wanted?”

“I value my self-preservation, and being underage and meeting with strange men to fuck sounds like the first five minutes of a procedural crime show,” Cas points out, “Murder aside, I don’t even have a smart phone.”

“Well, when you put it that way.”

“Yeah, when I put it that way,” Castiel says, and because he’s exactly that desperate to get off the subject of how much sex he is not having, he says, “You never told me how the Lisa thing came to be.”

“Oh yeah,” Dean says, and a grin finds its way back onto his face, “Okay, so, Bobby sent me to go grab Jimmy John’s for him and me and the other guys, right? And Lisa and her friend are coming out of that froyo joint next door when I’m gettin’ out of my car. I wave at her and we chat for a while, and she says she’s free tonight if I wanna hang out. Like I’m gonna say no to that, am I right? So anyway, I go over there, and she’s like ‘oh yeah, my parents are at this auction thing blah blah blah,’
and I just kissed her. ‘Cause why not? Anyway, we end up naked in her basement and she just – rides the shit out of me, Cas. Like a pony. It was awesome.’

“I’m happy for you,” Castiel replies. It’s the polite thing to say, and it’s not untrue, even if he does envy Lisa Braeden for having the opportunity to ride Dean like a pony. Lisa is a good thing and Dean deserves good things, even if those good things do not coincide with Castiel’s own selfish interests.

“Really?” Dean says, crumpling his empty burger wrapper into a ball and tossing it into the empty McDonald’s back between them on the floor.

“Of course I am,” Castiel says, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“It’s just that –” Dean pauses, “Nevermind.”

“It’s just that what?” Castiel says.

“I said nevermind, Cas. It’s stupid,” Dean says.

His tone is so sharp that Castiel doesn’t bother prying anymore, even though he’s desperately curious. So instead of pursuing that line of conversation, he says, “Would you like to see the drawing I finished last night?” and reaches back for the place between his mattress and the wall where he stashes his sketchbook.

Dean’s shoulders sag under the weight of relief, and a gentle smile touches his lips when he replies, “Yeah, man. Totally. Pass that over here.”

And like that, the summer days roll to a close, ending with crammed-in summer reading homework and each night spent out to live it to the fullest, to smoke joints and drink beers with Dean, to throw a frisbee or play by the creek with Sam, to watch movies and play board games with Charlie, to visit the mall or drink with Meg – to spend as much time as he can with his friends before those perfect hours become consumed by long school days and math homework at the kitchen table.

Like last year, Missouri shuttles all of her foster kids in her giant van to Goodwill for back-to-school shopping. Castiel finds a sturdy pair of jeans and some almost-new shoes, and a Ramones t-shirt that hugs his chest in a way that he likes.

Unlike last year, he won’t be taking the school bus anymore, because Dean has his license and permission from John to use the Impala to drive Sammy to school and then take himself and Castiel to Smoky Bluff, with the stipulation that he’ll “be taken out back and shot” if anything happens to the car.

The first day of Castiel’s sophomore year therefore starts in a Ramones t-shirt, black sneakers and eyeliner, inside a ’67 Chevy Impala with his best friend belting out the words to some classic rock song in the driver’s seat beside him.

Smoky Bluff greets them with familiar brick walls and prison windows, and the buzz of excitement that accompanies new beginnings. Dean parks the Impala in a space near the back of the school lot and pops his knuckles as he turns off the engine.

“Here goes nothin’,” he mutters, and Castiel snorts.

As he and Dean walk through the front doors side by side, Castiel feels with confidence that this
promises to be an interesting year.
The Hopeless, Hungry Side of Town

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, I just wanted to leave a shoutout to all you readers. All the nice messages and comments I’ve gotten have been really encouraging for me. You're all so sweet! (and some of you even inspired me to write some events and conversations ;D)

PS sorry about all the UST. I promise we're SO CLOSE to Destiel happening.

Chapter Track: Man in Black – Johnny Cash

The Hopeless, Hungry Side of Town

Two weeks into the new school year, the Smoky Bluff GSA has its first meeting, which is more like a party than anything – they have snacks and prizes and games, all things that Charlie organized and had them all help her make posters on colored butcher paper to hang all over the inside of the school, in the cafeteria and along the stair banisters (Castiel’s posters, by far, looked the nicest). Dean brings Lisa to the event and wins her a paper plate of homemade brownies. Castiel tries not to focus too hard on it and focuses on the event, orienting some of the new, wide-eyed freshmen.

Castiel wins a rainbow-striped flag at one of the game stations, and when he arrives back at Sugar Lane later that afternoon with Dean, he tacks it up to the wall beside his bunk, beside a slightly-blurry photo of Dean and him, side by side on the couch at Charlie’s birthday party earlier that year.

He likes waking up to those things every morning, signs that he has a place here. He loves them almost as much as he loves seeing the tattoo over his heart in the bathroom mirror after he steps out of the shower or when he stumbles in to relieve himself in the early morning.

Falling back into a school routine isn’t as easy as Castiel hoped, though it seems to be harder for Dean that it has been for him. The rhythm of the days for Castiel goes to a standard beat: wake up, get dressed, school, come home, homework, sleep. Dean has responsibility beyond school and homework. He has Sam to look after because of their dad’s late shift, he has his work at Bobby’s salvage yard every other day after school, and he has Lisa now.

Lisa, who has changed her relationship status on Facebook to read in a relationship. Dean doesn’t have a Facebook, but that doesn’t lessen the blow to his gut when he logs onto the computer in the boys’ home and sees this news.

“You are Lisa are an item now,” Castiel says, when he slides into the passenger seat of the Impala on a dreary, early September Wednesday morning.

Sam pipes up from the backseat, “Dean gave her a flower.”

“Shut up,” Dean says, but his freckles are highlighted by the blush on his cheeks.

“He picked it out of one of Bobby’s window boxes,” says Sam, “You know when he sees you on his security cam he’s gonna whoop your butt, right?”

“Yeah, well. That’s the price you pay for wooing a hot girl,” Dean defends.
Sam rolls his eyes and exhales a world-weary, *I have a stupid brother* sigh, flopping onto the backseat with a frown on his face. He says, “Lisa’s okay.”

Dean looks sharply back at his younger brother and says, “She’s way better than okay.”

“I like Cas more,” Sam says.

“Sam,” Cas immediately says. For a twelve year old, Sam Winchester is unusually empathetic and in tune to the emotions of others. But like a typical twelve year old, he thinks it’s a good idea to butt into business that isn’t his at all. It’s an unfortunate combination.

Dean looks at them both, but only briefly before he returns his eyes to the road. He doesn’t say anything. They drive to Sam’s junior high school without speaking, just listening to Dean’s latest obsession – Johnny Cash. Sam waves when they pull up to the front of the school, and trots down the walk toward the front door. Like he does every day, Dean lingers for a few moments and watches Sam’s form get smaller, like a concerned parent, before he lowers his foot to the gas pedal and pulls away from the busy parking lot.

“What the hell was Sam talking about?” Dean finally says, adjusting the volume knob so the sound of *Cry! Cry! Cry!* goes dim.

Castiel shrugs and lies, “I don’t know,” because it’s better not to ruin the way that things are now. He knows better than to fall into the trap of telling your best friend that you love them, especially when they’re already happy and in a perfectly good relationship.

By the time that Dean parks into a space in the back of the Smoky Bluff parking lot, he’s smiling and singing along to his music again, like nothing happened.

Castiel is happy keeping it this way.

X

A month later, as Sugar Lane residents decorate the outsides of their trailers and mobile homes with purple and orange lights, fake spider webs, and place squat, orange pumpkins alongside their doorsteps, Victor Henriksen appears at Mama Missouri’s with a new kid in tow. Castiel is doing homework at Mama’s kitchen table with the Rocky Horror soundtrack blaring in his ears when the kid arrives. He has messy blond hair and a jaded look on his face, the same expression Castiel imagines that he wore when he came here, too.

“Castiel,” Mama Missouri says, and a hand settles on his shoulder.

He pulls one headphone out of his ear and answers, “Huh?”

“Would you mind showing Balthazar to your room? He’ll be taking the empty bunk,” she says.

“Hmm? Yeah, okay,” Castiel says.

Balthazar-slash-new kid watches him quietly as Castiel gathers his homework together from where it’s spread out across the kitchen table and stuffs it into his backpack. He slings the backpack over his shoulders and jerks his head at the door.

“Come on, it’s this way,” he says.

“The bedroom isn’t in the house?” Balthazar says. A soft accent shades his words, and Castiel lifts his brows.
He shakes his head and steps out as he explains, “Mama has a bunch of mobile homes, ‘cause we can’t all fit in one. It takes a little time to get used to, but it’s easier to sneak out this way.”

Balthazar follows a few steps behind him with a small rolling suitcase. Castiel watches him carefully as they make their way up the steps and into the boys’ home. He’s tense and keeps his eyes down to the ground. And if he’s been foisted on Mama Missouri, he’s definitely been through a whole slew of homes before this. It was probably a slew of mostly shitty homes with a couple of okay ones thrown in, if Castiel’s own experience is anything to go by.

The new kid’s knuckles are bloody on one hand. The other hand is wrapped up in an Ace bandage.

“This is our room,” Castiel introduces. He points to his place on the bottom bunk and says, “That’s my bed.” He thought about switching beds after Zeke left, but decided that he couldn’t store his sketchbook as well if he didn’t have the space under the bed and the crack between the bunk and the wall. Castiel goes on, “That one’s Gabriel’s. He’s probably out with his girlfriend or something, and that’s Andy.”

Andy waves, “Hola, amigo.”

“Hello,” Balthazar says uncertainly. He pushes down the handle on his suitcase and throws the entire thing on the bunk above Castiel’s. He remarks, “Nice flag,” and then asks, “Is that your boyfriend?”

“May as well be, considering how much Castiel wants Dean’s dick up his ass,” a voice says behind them.

Castiel glares, “Gabe, was that necessary? And no, he isn’t my boyfriend. He’s my best friend, and he’s dating a girl named Lisa.”

“Yeah, sure, okay. You keep telling yourself that,” says Gabriel. He unzips his hoodie and sheds it, flinging it up over the edge of his bunk before he climbs up the ladder and retrieves his sticker-littered laptop and opens it in his lap. He continues, “He and Dean have bestie tattoos and bestie bracelets. If that doesn’t say ‘we touch each other,’ then I don’t know what does.”

“A tattoo?” Balthazar says, interested, “May I see?”

Castiel sighs and pulls his t-shirt up, just long enough for Balthazar to get a good look at the black and white ink.

“Always love,” Balthazar reads, and then queries “Are you certain he isn’t your beau?”

“Not you too,” Castiel sighs, “And for your information, it says ‘always friends.’ It’s Latin.”

“Well, in Italian, it says ‘always love,’” Balthazar replies, “I’m just saying.”

A hoot of laughter rips out of Gabriel, and he leans over the edge of his bunk to chuckle, “Oh man. I can’t wait until Dean finds out about that one.”

“Maybe then he’ll come out of the closet,” Andy says from behind his book.

Gabriel laughs harder and says, “I don’t know, man. He’s so far in there he’s probably found his dad’s Playboys.”

All three of them – Gabriel, Andy and Balthazar – laugh at this.

“Ha ha,” Castiel glares, “You guys are so hilarious.”
It figures that quiet Zeke would be replaced with somebody just as obnoxious as the other two foster brothers he has to share a room with.

X

It happens only a week and a half into Balthazar’s stay at Mama Missouri’s. Cas climbs into the shower after hovering in the shop while Dean worked in the belly of a Buick. He’s dirty from helping Dean accomplish the job, letting Dean show him important parts of the car and pass him tools.

Dean looks much happier under a car than he ever is at school, filthy and clothed in a dark blue jumpsuit, but with a grin on his freckled face.

When Castiel comes home covered in engine grease and a silly smile, Missouri scolds him for treading dirt into the house and instructs him to bathe. He doesn’t bother arguing, just steps out of Mama’s home and moves to the boys’ home, where he dumps his backpack on the floor and ducks into the bathroom, stripping off his jeans and t-shirt. He scrubs the eyeliner off of his eyes so it doesn’t run under the shower stream.

The hot shower is just what he needed, steam filling his lungs. He uses some kind of oat soap that he bought during late summer when Mama took them to a farmer’s market and gave them all ten dollars to spend on whatever they wanted.

He sings lowly as he scrubs, the words to *I Can Make You a Man* rumbling out over the sound of the water slapping against the tile wall and tub.

Castiel stops singing when he shuts off the water and dries himself off on the shower mat, tucking a towel around his waist. Balthazar is the only one of his foster brothers in the bedroom when he pads in over the carpet and opens his part of the dresser to retrieve some pajamas. He slides fresh boxer briefs and sweatpants.

He doesn’t realize that Balthazar is right behind him until he hears the creak of the bunk bed’s ladder and turns to see his foster brother a hair’s breadth away.

“You are in my personal space,” Castiel says slowly, and hopes that Balthazar isn’t the kind of foster brother that’s awful, that makes his life hard to live because he needs somebody to pick on.

But no, that’s when it happens. Balthazar doesn’t hit him or even poke him or tickle him. He leans in and presses his lips against Castiel’s. The kiss is brief. It doesn’t even last a second, only long enough to register the brush of skin and the smell of Balthazar’s shampoo.

“Um,” Castiel manages.

“I apologize,” Balthazar says, “It was – I was –”

Castiel takes a step forward and kisses Balthazar again. At first Balthazar stills and doesn’t react to the embrace, but then he rests his hands on Castiel’s bare chest and kisses back, tongue snaking into his mouth to lap along the roof and curl their tongues together.

Balthazar is handsome, certainly. He has soft blond hair and gray-blue eyes that since living here with them under Mama Missouri’s care have more mischief in them than Castiel expected. But beyond appearance, he knows very little about Balthazar. He’s seen him read, though his enthusiasm about the bookshelf was more subdued than Castiel’s.

And then Balthazar’s hand slips underneath Castiel’s sweatpants and underwear, fingers closing
around the heat of his soft cock. Castiel jumps and withdraws, just enough for Balthazar’s hand to hesitate. He asks, “Wait. Was that okay?”

“It’s okay,” Castiel shyly says, “I was just surprised.”

An odd little smile tips Balthazar’s lips, and he readjusts his grip. He strokes Castiel to life and presses open-mouthed kisses to the skin of his jaw and throat. When their mouths connect again, Balthazar kisses hard, much harder than the way that Crowley kissed. Crowley kissed like Castiel was a math problem or a science experiment, a frog carcass pinned to a tray to dissect and discover each little part of. Balthazar kisses Castiel like Castiel might disappear at any moment.

The lack of touch by anyone’s hand but his own has him climbing toward his orgasm much more quickly than he thought it would. In only a handful of minutes he gasps against the pressure of Balthazar’s probing tongue, “G-Going to come,” and does so, promptly.

A little intake of breath comes from behind them. At the noise, Castiel and Balthazar leap apart.

Uriel stands in the door frame, a stricken look on his face. An instant later, he’s gone.

“Shit,” summarizes Castiel.

Ten minutes later, Balthazar and Castiel stand in front of Missouri in her bedroom, the door closed so that none of the other foster kids can eavesdrop on whatever lecture she has in store for them. At first, Mama Missouri just sighs and folds her arms over her chest.

She shakes her head at them and says, “Really? New boy’s here for all of a few days and he’s already got his hand down your pants. Castiel, sugar, are you serious?”

“Hey, he started it!” Castiel insists.

“You continued it,” Balthazar responds.

Missouri touches a hand to her head and mutters, “Lord help me,” before she looks up again to address them, “All right. I got no problem with you boys likin’ each other. That’s just fine. I just want you to consider what you’re doing, all right? You’re living in this household with one another, and I’m not going to rearrange your bedroom arrangements just ‘cause you broke up or something.”

“Yes, Mama,” Castiel says.

“And for love of all things holy, you will use protection,” she says.

They glance at each other at that.

“And,” she says, “Don’t you get up to any funny business with your brothers around. I didn’t fall off the applecart yesterday – I’m sure you’re gonna feel each other up whether or not I think it’s a good idea. Just do us all a favor and get up to whatever you’re gettin’ up to in private.”

“Yes, Mama,” Castiel murmurs.

Missouri lifts one brow at Balthazar.

Balthazar coughs out, “Yes, ma’am.”

She lifts her other brow.
“Mama,” he corrects, “Yes, Mama.”

“Good boys,” she says, “Now get. I imagine you got homework, and I got a meal to put on the table.”

As they slip out of Mama Missouri’s bedroom, a befuddled look crosses Balthazar’s face. He asks, “What was that?”

“Just Mama,” shrugs Castiel.

“This isn’t like a regular foster home, is it?” Balthazar asks.

At this, Castiel snorts and smiles, “No. No, not really. It’s better.”

X

“Dude, what? But he’s your foster brother!” Dean looks incredulous, even with the shadows like bruises underneath his eyes.

“So?” Castiel shrugs, “It’s not like we’re related.” He takes Dean’s flask from his hand and tips it back, even though he has gym class as soon as their lunch period is over. Meg sits back on one of the graffitied rocks at The Shed and sucks on a cigarette, watching as they bicker.

“Yeah, but it’s still weird,” Dean says.

“Why do you even care?” Castiel snips, “You had sex with different women all summer, and some of those weren’t the most ethical fucks. That woman with the Firebird is that Eric kid’s mom, the one in my chemistry class –”

“I made that up,” Dean says.

“What?”

“I didn’t actually get a blowie from the hot mom with the Firebird,” Dean says.

“Well, whatever,” Castiel responds, “I just – I don’t expect you to understand feeling the way that I do. You want to sleep with someone, there’s someone there. I don’t get to do that, because I’m awkward and weird and apparently zero guys want to come out at fifteen years old in Kansas. So I’m lonely sometimes. It’s not a fucking crime to want to stop being lonely, you know.”

Dean takes a sip from his flask. It’s whiskey, and shitty whiskey to boot. Cheap whiskey is a Winchester staple, and Dean has come with a flask of it tucked into the inside pocket of his jacket nearly every single day since the school year began. He’s paler, too, and not just because summer came to a close and he’s spending more time indoors. He looks exhausted, shoulders sagging under the invisible weight of numerous responsibilities.

“You have me,” Dean finally says.

The words slam into Cas with all the weight of an eighteen wheeler. He swallows the lump in his throat and snatches the flask out of Dean’s hand. He definitely needs to be drunker before he can have this conversation. He doesn’t like to admit to need, because if there’s one thing that going through the system should do, it’s make him strong. But he isn’t strong, and hasn’t been strong since he arrived here. He needs so much that he didn’t know he did. He needs affection, needs to feel arms around him and soft kisses on his lips and on his skin, and he needs the closeness of sex.
He needs those things.

“Dean,” Castiel says, trying to keep his tone neutral, “I know I have you. We’re best friends. But that’s all that we are. I need more than friends. I didn’t think that I did, but sometimes I just want to be kissed. Sometimes I just want to be fucked. Sometimes I just want to be held. You’re the best friend that I’ve ever had, but even the best friend in the whole world doesn’t kiss and fuck and hold their friends just so they’ll be a little less lonely, okay?”

Dean doesn’t say anything, so Cas drinks another sip of terrible liquor and adds, “Balthazar gets that. The lonely thing. Most foster kids do. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“But I do!” Dean insists, “I get it, Cas. I mean – it’s just – why the fuck do you think I have so much sex, anyway?”

“Because you’re attractive,” Castiel reasons, “Because you’re funny and you could charm the pants off of Professor Umbridge if you wanted to –”

“Okay, a – ew. But dude? That’s not fucking why I have sex, that’s how it happens. I like sleeping around ‘cause – you know?”

“No, Dean, I’m afraid you’ll have to elaborate on that,” Castiel says.

“He has so much sex because when he does, he feels better for a while,” Meg says from the space across them. In his fervor, Castiel forgot she was there. She goes on, “Kinda like how I feel when I smoke a cigarette or eat Chipotle. You know. Anyway, I’m out. This is getting too real.”

Castiel watches Meg’s back as she retreats back to the school building. He sighs, “Look. I’m happy I have you. But I need more sometimes. All right?”

The exhaustion reads in every movement of Dean’s body as he takes back his flask and polishes off what’s left of the whiskey inside. He mutters to his combat boots, “I’m glad I got you too, Cas.”

Castiel smiles a little at this and rests his arm around Dean’s shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. He lets his head flop against Dean’s shoulder and exhales. For a moment, he pretends that he does have that more that he wants from Dean – that he has the kissing and fucking and holding. He doesn’t, of course, but when he smells the hair gel and whiskey and leather and all those things that make Dean, he can let fantasy lure him in, if only for a few, perfect minutes.

“Sorry,” Dean mutters.

“What for?” asks Castiel.

“I’m being a dick,” he says, “I’m just so tired, you know? There’s school and it’s the same fuckin’ thing every day. We come here, they drill us so we can pass tests and go to college and shit and I’m just sitting here thinking that I don’t even want to do all that crap. College costs so goddamn much, and I don’t want to leave Sammy behind with my dad. So it’s like, why would I go? And if I’m not going to college, then what am I doing here?” Dean rubs his hands over his face, pressing down on his eyes like they’re hurting him. When he looks back up, he asks, “How do you know what you wanna do?”

“I don’t,” Cas says, “To be honest, Dean, until I came here it didn’t occur to me that I had a future. I always figured I’d end up dead somewhere before I even turned eighteen. Now? I don’t have the faintest clue.”

“Dude,” Dean says.
Castiel shrugs. No one ever told him he had a future until he came to live at Sugar Lane, and most
days he still doesn’t believe it. But what is he going to do when this is all the past, when high school
is over and done with? He doesn’t know. There’s college, but Dean’s right. College is expensive.

“At least we can be fucking clueless together,” Cas finally says.

A weary laugh escapes Dean at that, and he agrees, “Yeah. Yeah, we can. Thanks, man.”

Castiel smiles and pulls back away from Dean at last. He checks his watch and says, “Lunch
period’s almost over.”

“Wanna skip?” asks Dean.

“Yes, please,” Castiel says.

They decide together to take the Impala and make a snack run at a nearby 7-11, since they ignored
their lunches in favor of drinking and commiserating over exhaustion and loneliness. Dean smiles
when he slides into the driver’s seat, and so Castiel smiles, too. The Impala makes Dean happy, like
fixing cars make Dean happy, and she’ll tease a smile from Dean that’s been rarer and rarer since the
start of the school year.

“Fuckin’ A, dude,” Dean says, when they pull out of the Smoky Bluff parking lot.

“Yes. I agree,” Castiel says seriously, and Dean snorts.

“You know why I bet I’m so worked up?” Dean finally concludes, “I bet it’s because I’m meeting
Lisa’s parents. She invited me over to dinner on Friday night, and I’m supposed to look nice and be
the kid that they want their daughter to date. You know where they live, Cas?”

“No.”

“Near the country club,” he says, “You know, in those suburbs with the huge houses.”

“Where Crowley lives?” Castiel asks, and cocks his head.

“Yeah, I think so,” Dean says, “God. I live in a trailer. I have one tie, Cas. One.”

“You’ll be fine,” Castiel reassures him, “Anybody that doesn’t like you is an idiot.”

Dean huffs another tired laugh out and says, “Thanks, Cas. Same goes for you.”

\[X\]

Instead of heading home on Friday, Castiel joins Dean at his trailer and helps him get ready for his
dinner date at the Braeden household, because Dean insists. Dean insists upon Cas’ help, even when
Cas tells him, “Just because I’m gay doesn’t mean I know how to dress you, right?” He can’t even
dress himself, for goodness’ sake. But Dean wants him there for moral support, because they’re best
friends. And \textit{that} Castiel can manage.

He does make Dean comb his hair, though.

Castiel and Sam see Dean off, both of them picking at his clothes and hair until they deem him
suitable to be seen. He climbs into the Impala after that, and Sam and Castiel wait outside and watch
him leave before they wander off on their own, toward the creek.

There, Sam picks up a stick and pokes at the soft mud alongside the swampy water. He says, “I miss
“I do too,” Castiel admits.

“We could rebuild it,” suggests Sam.

Castiel looks at the dilapidated mess of wood and soda cans, the stray shopping cart now long gone, maybe in a dump someplace, maybe the feature in some other kids’ fantasy game. He settles on saying, “I think Dean would want to be here if we did.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, “I guess you’re right. Hey, Cas?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you like Dean?”

Cas’ heart skips a beat and he answers, “Of course I like Dean. He’s my best friend.”

Sam wrinkles his nose, “Not like that, dummy. I mean, do you like-like Dean?” He watches Castiel’s face and then hastens to add, “It’s okay if you do. I won’t tell.”

Castiel exhales and scrubs his fingers back through his hair. He kicks one of the crushed beer cans on the ground with the toe of his sneaker and says, “Sam, you can’t tell him.”

“So do you.”

“Yeah, I do. You like Dean, and Dean should be with you,” Sam defends.

“That’s not how it works, and I know that you’re smart enough to know that, Sam Winchester,” Castiel says back, “Your brother doesn’t like me in that way, and that’s okay. He’s under no obligation to do so.”

Sam frowns like he wants to argue, but doesn’t speak. Like Castiel, he kicks at one of the discarded cans, sending it flying across the ground so hard that it lands on top of the flowing creek with a soft plunk and floats downstream into a patch of reeds. When he does open his mouth again, the topic of Castiel’s unrequited affection for Dean has passed, and Sam instead asks, “What are you supposed to do when you like a person?”

“Typically, you’re supposed to tell them,” Castiel replies, “but obviously it’s not black and white. Do you think that person might like you back?”

“Maybe,” Sam says, “I hope so.”

“Then try,” Castiel says.

“Yeah,” Sam breathes, “Hey, can we watch a movie at Mama’s?”
“Sure, Sam.”

X

Castiel and Sam are halfway through watching Kiki’s Delivery Service, which they decided to watch after Howl’s Moving Castle. Gabriel recommended Howl’s Moving Castle, and though Castiel would not trust his foster brother’s authority on everything, Gabriel does seem to have a good grasp on what movies are fun to watch.

They’re so engrossed in the movie that they don’t hear someone come into the den until Dean clears his throat and says, “Hey.”

Sam, Gabriel and Castiel all look up, while Hester and Anna, who slipped into the movie-watching session a few minutes into watching Howl’s Moving Castle, remain focused on the characters moving on the television screen.

Dean looks grim.

He says, “Sammy, s’it okay if I borrow Cas for a little? You mind sticking it out here?”

“I wanna finish watching the movie,” Sam says.

“All right, you be good,” he says.

Anna interjects, “Oh my god, just take him and leave. We’re trying to watch the movie.”

Castiel pushes the quilt that he and Sam are sharing on the floor of the den off of his legs and stands. He follows Dean out of the den and has a feeling that they won’t be drinking tea and talking about their feelings in Mama’s kitchen, so he slides his feet into his sneakers and grabs his hoodie from where he left it draped over one of the kitchen chairs.

“How’d it go?” Cas asks once they’re finally outside. The Impala is pulled up to the front of Mama’s house, and without questioning, Castiel climbs into the passenger seat when Dean unlocks the vehicle.

The way that Dean slams the Impala’s door when he gets into the driver’s side does not bode well for his answer. When he does speak, he says, “How the hell do think it went, Cas?”

“Um,” Castiel says, “Not well?”

“Yeah, it was fucking crap,” he says, “they wanted me to ‘say grace’ or whatever, and I’ve never done that before, and I fucked it up somehow. At least I think I did. And I forgot to not talk with my mouth full, and I got salad dressing on this stupid shirt. Fuck.” Dean sweeps a hand over his dress shirt, where a grease stain streaks the left side, and slams a fist down on the steering wheel.

“Did they say anything?” asks Castiel. He’s never had a boyfriend, so he doesn’t know what one does when they meet the parents. He’s sure that Crowley’s mom knew that Castiel and her son got up to shenanigans together, but she never questioned it and so Castiel didn’t worry.

Dean starts the car before he says anything. They start driving, and Castiel doesn’t bother asking where they’re going.

“I was saying goodbye to Lisa, and her dad’s all like, ‘I’ll walk you out to your car,’ and we’re outside on the driveway and he’s just like, ‘Blah, blah, blah, you need to clean yourself up, blah, blah blah.’ He told me a kid like me wasn’t gonna cut it. And he just kept calling me kid. Fuck, I
hate when people do that. You know, when they treat me like I’m stupid,” he says, “I know I’m not
the smartest guy –”

“You’re not stupid, so don’t say it,” Castiel firmly says.

“Cas,” Dean says, long-suffering and serious.

“I’m serious, Dean,” Castiel warns, “You’re one of the smartest people I know, and if you say
otherwise I am actually going to smite you.”

“Smite me, huh?”

“Smite you,” Castiel confirms.

“Guess I’ll keep quiet, then,” Dean says, “Hey, you wanna do something fucking dumb?”

“Why not?”

Dean doesn’t take them far. Castiel doesn’t recognize where they’re going until he sees the familiar
roofs of expensive houses – Lisa’s neighborhood. Crowley’s neighborhood.

“We’re not going to Lisa’s, are we?” he asks.

“Come on, Cas,” Dean responds, “Shit, I’m not doing something that fucking dumb. Just sort of
fucking dumb.”

Dean rounds up the hill and through the street. When he parks the car, they’re in front of the country
club, the one where Crowley’s mom has her monthly book club meetings. There’s a clubhouse at the
top of the hill, surrounded by an expensively-kept garden and a sprawling golf course.

“Dean…” Castiel starts, “What are we doing?”

“Daddy Braeden loves his golf,” Dean says with a grin.

They smoke a joint in the Impala before they get out of the car. Dean leaves the windows cracked to
air out the skunky smell of the weed as they cross the street and start crunching through the pristine
grass of the country club golf course, laughing about things that probably wouldn’t be as funny if
they weren’t high.

“You know what I’ve always wanted to do?” Dean says as they walk. They crest the top of a grassy
hill. Below rests the golf course pond, water black from the dark of night, though the surface reflects
the brightness of the gibbous moon. Dean’s goofy smile widens, “Skinny dipping.”

“Skinny dipping?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Before Cas can get a word in edgewise, Dean already has his tie loosened. He stuffs it into the
pocket of his nice jeans and his fingers go to work on the buttons of his dress shirt. It flutters to the
ground and reveals Dean’s naked back, where a few freckles dot the skin surrounding the crease of
his spine. Dean’s shoes and remaining clothing disappear in quick succession, and he runs.

Dean runs, stark naked, down the hill. The moonlight makes his skin look paler, bathing him in that
nighttime glow as he whoops and laughs, ass bouncing with the rhythm of his footfalls in the neatly-
kept golf course grass. At the edge of the pond he flings his body forward and lunges into the pond
with an enormous SPLASH.
“Fuck, it’s cold!” he exclaims, “You comin’, Cas?”

Oh, what the hell? Castiel doesn’t run down the hill, and instead of leaving his clothing haphazardly strewn across the golf course, he strips at the edge of the pond, folding his things into a pile a couple feet from the edge. The cool October air makes him shiver. For a brief moment he considers his modesty and thinks about being self-conscious...but it's only Dean, so he decides against it.

“Don’t chicken out,” Dean warns from the water.

Castiel jumps.

The pond water is freezing. His teeth chatter, and he wraps his arms around himself. He says, “Jesus Christ, Dean. It’s freezing.” He doesn’t even care that Dean is less than a foot away from him and naked as the day he was born. It’s cold as hell.

Then there’s a little warmth.

“Dean,” Castiel cries, scandalized, “Did you just pee in the pond?”

“Maybe,” Dean smirks.

“Oh, nasty,” Castiel complains, and scrambles to get out of the water. Now that he’s wet the cold is worse, but he only manages to get his boxers over his wet skin before Dean has erupted from the water and is taking off in another direction, laughing at the top of his lungs.

“HEY!”

“Oh, shit,” he hears Dean say.

A man in a security uniform appears with a flashlight in his hand. Castiel snatches his clothing off of the ground and watches as Dean sprints down the hill, still in the nude, underwear (boxer briefs patterned in green light sabers) clutched in his hands.

“C’mon, we can outrun this clown,” Dean says, and runs straight past Castiel with a grin, in a direction that is without a doubt not back toward the Impala.

Castiel runs after. The security guard chases after them, shouting expletives and demanding for them to turn back, but Dean and Castiel keep running. Cas can feel his lungs start to burn, his asthma aggravated by the activity, but he keeps going.

At the eighteenth hole, Dean jumps and steals the flag.

“Got it,” he pants, and in the flag’s wake he leaves his light saber underwear draped over the flimsy flagpole, a monument to their own stupidity.

The security guard has almost caught up, and so they take off to the side and circle back to the area near the pond, pausing just long enough for Dean to collect his jeans and combat boots – though he leaves the salad dressing-stained dress shirt discarded in the grass.

“You little shits, get back here!”

Fuck, security is closing in on them. Castiel makes himself run harder – and then up the hill, then clear of the edge of the golf course, bare, wet feet slapping against pavement as they dart across the street to the Impala. Dean fumbles with his jeans to retrieve his car keys for an awful moment, the light of the security guard’s flashlight on their face as he extracts them from the front pocket.
They throw themselves into the car, not even bothering to buckle in before Dean starts it. Through the back windshield, Castiel sees the security guard just behind them, standing in the middle of the street. A look of bewildered fury twist his face.

Dean starts laughing as they roar away, jetting past big houses and back toward their own modest homes.

They’re naked and wet and freezing. Castiel’s hands shake as he unfolds his jeans and digs in the pocket for his inhaler. When Dean sees what he’s doing he asks, “Shit, are you okay?”

Cas doses himself with Albuterol and says, “I’ve had worse,” and then grins, because holy hell. That was some of the best fun that he’s ever had in his life. Adrenaline pulses through his entire body, protecting against the worst of the cold, and his high from the joint that he and Dean shared makes him giddy, stupid with laughter as they drive naked toward Sugar Lane.

“That was awesome,” Dean guffaws, “Oh my god, the look on that dude’s face when we left him standing in the road. Priceless.”

Dean parks the Impala in an empty lot a few blocks north of Sugar Lane so that they can pull their clothes on behind the safety of an abandoned building. Castiel doses himself with more asthma medication, and they laugh quietly about how fucking stupid that was. Dean waves the flag that he stole from the eighteenth hole and says, “This is so going on my wall.”

Castiel smiles back at him, a hot rush of affection pouring into him like molten wax, filling him from the tips of his fingers to the space between his ears. He can’t stop staring at Dean, even as they climb back into the Impala. Dean doesn’t restart her right away, though. He stares at Castiel right back.

The huge grin on Dean’s face falters.

“Hey, Cas?” he says, voice quiet and no longer tinged with laughter.

“Yes?”

They’re close again, body heat mingling.

“Thanks for doing this with me,” Dean says.

Dean's hair is damp and sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes are heavy-lidded, face laced with shadow from the single nearby streetlamp giving off an orange glow. The smell of weed permeates the car, but through it there's that scent of Dean's skin, the smell that Cas would swear is an aphrodisiac.

But as soon as Dean realizes there’s only a small distance between them, he jerks back and turns the key in the ignition.

The spell is broken.
Halloween passes, and Thanksgiving and Christmas follow in quick succession. Castiel’s birthday celebration this year takes place at a bowling alley a few weeks after he’s already turned sixteen. Meg and Charlie and Dean come to the party, and Dean brings Lisa. They drink soda and eat nachos loaded with fake cheese, and at the end of the night when everyone’s respective parents have come to get them and only Dean and Cas are left, they bowl one more game before calling Mama and spend the end of the night at the creek with Sam. Dean and Cas drink beers, and Dean lets Sam have a sip. Sam declares that he does not like beer.

Dean’s seventeenth birthday comes and goes with even less bravado, just the two of them – Dean and Cas – sitting in the Impala at a playground somewhere, smoking a joint on the hood of the car and passing Dean’s flask after a contest to see who could jump furthest from the swings.

All their birthdays mark the passing of time, but at Sugar Lane that’s a cause for celebration, so Castiel uses his allowance to buy Dean a set of Marvel hero themed guitar picks and a butterfly knife. Lisa buys Dean an entire record player and an original Led Zeppelin vinyl. Dean is more excited about Lisa’s gift than Castiel has seen him in forever, so he tries not to let how jealous he is show.

Instead, Castiel wraps up his envy in hot, stolen kisses from Balthazar when they have a moment of peace from the rest of their foster brothers. He pours the frustration into drawing his demons in his sketchbook, and tries not to think about how the beautiful set of colored pencils he uses was a gift from Dean.

And one night when Gabriel’s at one of his theater events and Andy’s out at some training thing for his new job at the nearby mall, Balthazar and Castiel kiss kisses hotter than usual and shed their clothes. When Balthazar asks Castiel to fuck him, Castiel does, even though he’s never tried being on top and is nervous about doing it now.

They both come, which Castiel counts as a victory, though instead of holding each other, they redress in their pajamas and lounge clothed in Castiel’s bed, working on homework, even though Castiel wants to draw, because Castiel doesn’t want to share his drawings with Balthazar.

“God, it fucking reeks in here,” Gabriel announces when he bangs into the bedroom, theater bag thrown over his shoulder. His hair is damp from showering, but the faintest traces of blush and eyeliner are still visible on his face. He throws his things on the floor and says, “At least I find someplace else to fuck. C’mon, guys.”

“We don’t have another place to have sex,” Castiel says pointedly, without looking up from his trigonometry homework.

“Well, invest in some Febreze,” Gabriel says, and hoists himself up over the edge of the bunk, “Jesus Christ.”

The conversation drops off as Gabriel screws his headphones into his ears and browses through his laptop, probably ignoring homework that he should be doing. Gabriel serves as the biggest case of senioritis that Castiel has ever witnessed in his life, giving up any sort of academic motivation for his
love of theater, sneaking out to see his girlfriend, and partying relentlessly.

Unfairly, Gabriel never seems to be tired by any of this.

Only a few minutes into the quiet, of Gabriel’s keys clicking lightly as he chats on Skype and the scrape of pages as Balthazar’s eyes scan over his copy of *A Raisin in the Sun*, of the scratch-scratch of Castiel’s mechanical pencil against the lined paper of his trigonometry notebook – shouting rises up from nearby in the trailer park.

“What the hell is that?” asks Balthazar.

“Dean and his dad,” Castiel says, and glances up from his homework to glance out the bedroom window. The reflection of the light inside the room on the glass makes it impossible to see what’s going on, so Castiel shifts, setting his textbook and notes aside to stand at the window and stare out.

“Your Dean?” asks Balthazar.

“Yeah,” Cas answers, “My Dean.”

Castiel can’t make out the words that they’re yelling, but he can see Dean and John’s shadows moving from inside the Winchester trailer, aggressive monsters flickering over light as they argue. The argument is short-lived: only a few minutes into the shouting match, the door to the trailer slams closed, and Dean marches out into the cold night, silhouette slogging toward Bobby and Ellen’s trailer.

Only a second later, Cas pulls on his own shoes to make sure Dean’s all right. It isn’t late enough for Mama to be mad at him for going out, so he grabs his coat and heads out the front door of the mobile home.

When he knocks on the front door of the Singer-Harvelle mobile home, Bobby doesn’t look surprised to see that he’s there. He gives him a short, assessing look and asks, “Boy, what the hell have you got on your face?”

Castiel feels along his skin and says, “Eyeliner, probably.”

Bobby makes a noise and shakes his head before he opens the front door wider and ushers him in with a tip of his head. Dean sits at their kitchen table, Jo Harvelle on one of the chairs next to him, looking adoringly up at him. She’s thirteen, and everyone and their dog knows she thinks the sun rises and sets with Dean. This seems to amuse Ellen and aggravate Bobby. Castiel mostly thinks her crush on Dean is sweet.

“Cas,” Dean says, when he comes in. He pulls his shoes off near the front door and comes to sit on Dean’s other side, his right side. Dean asks, “What are you doing here?”

“Heard you and your dad hollerin’, probably,” Ellen says, and sets a mug of fragrant cocoa in front of Dean, and another in front of her daughter. She smiles at Castiel and asks, “You want some hot chocolate, honey?”

“Yes, please, Ms. Harvelle,” Castiel says, and Dean mutters something that sounds distinctly like *suck-up* from beside him.

Castiel turns around to stick his tongue out, and Dean lifts his middle finger.

The finger earns Dean a smack on the back of the head from Bobby, who says, “I see you do that here again I’m gonna cut that finger off and put it on display with my posies.”
“Sorry Bobby,” Dean says, and Bobby just shakes his head again.

“So,” Dean says.

“So what?” asks Castiel.

“So why are you here?” Dean questions, and fidgets with the hot rim of his mug, where milky hot chocolate sloshes when he raises the cup to his lips.

Cas slouches back in the kitchen chair and says, “Just wanted to check on you. I got worried. Friends occasionally do that, you know.”

“Smartass,” Dean mumbles, and sighs, “I can take care of myself, all right, Cas? You don’t need to treat me like a baby just ‘cause I got in a fight with my dad.”

Ellen reemerges from the kitchen with another mug. She gives Castiel a look before she sets it down on the table, an expression that he takes to mean that he’s supposed to sit up straight before she’ll let him have the hot chocolate. As soon as Cas draws himself back up in the chair and adjusts his posture, Ellen gives him a firm nod and puts the mug in front of him. He takes a test taste of the cocoa and sets it down when he burns the tip of his tongue.

For a long while, Castiel remains quiet. As much as he’s seen Bobby and Ellen and Jo out and about around the park, he’s never seen the inside of their own personal mobile home. He’s seen the inside of the office a couple times when Mama’s asked him to take the month’s rent check over, but never this home.

The Singer-Harvelle mobile home reminds Castiel of a hunting lodge. There’s a taxidermy stag head mounted on the faux-paneled wall, and most of the furniture looks as though it was made by hand. Even the curtains – short, utilitarian things in geometric fabric – look to be handmade.

“Mama Missouri made us those curtains,” Ellen says, when she catches Castiel looking, “Look nice, don’t they?”

Castiel nods, but doesn’t speak. Come to think of it, one or two pieces of furniture that he’s seen around Mama’s homes look similar to the ones here. He wonders if Ellen or Bobby made the furniture for Mama like Mama made the curtains for them. It wouldn’t surprise him if that were the case. Everyone in Sugar Lane knows everyone, and sometimes living in the park is like living in a family of a couple hundred people.

A dysfunctional family, certainly, but a family nonetheless.

The hot chocolate tastes amazing when it cools enough to drink, and fills Castiel with warmth that spreads from the edges of his ears to the tips of his toes. He and Dean and Jo have been sitting here quietly for some time now, and he could drop the awkward topic of conversation should he choose.

He doesn’t, though, and says, “Worrying about you doesn’t mean I’m treating you like a baby, stupid.”

“Well, it sure feels that way,” Dean says, “It makes me feel weird having everyone watch me. I know I’m screwed up but that doesn’t mean I can’t handle myself, okay?”

“You’re not screwed up,” Cas says.

Dean lifts his brows.
“Okay, you’re a little screwed up,” he amends, “But whatever, Dean. If you’re screwed up, that means I’m screwed up too.”

“You’re not screwed up,” Dean says, echoing Cas’ earlier sentiment.

“Really? Because I think a couple of hyper-religious, suicidal parents and seven years of bouncing from home to home might suggest otherwise,” Castiel says, and as Dean opens his mouth with what surely is another argument, Cas goes on, “But that’s okay. It’s okay that I’ve moved around and so what if I came from really messed up people? It’s okay to be screwed up, Dean.”

Dean exhales and scowls, crunching back into the kitchen chair like he wants to make himself look smaller. He doesn’t respond to Castiel, and instead calls back toward the living room, where Bobby and Ellen each have books in their hands, “Hey, can Cas spend the night with me in the guest room?”

Ellen and Bobby exchange glances over their books, giving each other a kind of silent communication that only parents master. When they answer, it’s Ellen that says, “Sure, but you gotta give Mama a call and make sure it’s all clear on her end. We’re not gettin’ in trouble with Missouri.”

Castiel finishes off his cocoa and leaves the room to do just that, ringing up Mama even though he could just as easily walk to her trailer and ask. She reluctantly consents with the stipulation that he’ll make sure to come home on time to get his chores finished up, since he neglected to vacuum the den so that he could check up on Dean instead.

“She says it’s okay,” he tells them when he steps back inside.

“All right,” Ellen nods, “Then you boys rinse out your mugs and go get washed up for bed. It’s gettin’ late and it’s a school night. Castiel, do you need a toothbrush?”

The motions of bedtime are efficient in this household; that much is clear. Jo, Dean and Castiel take turns rinsing the cocoa residue from their mugs and placing them upside-down in the top section of the dishwasher before they’re herded down the short hallway to the bathroom. Castiel is granted a brand new toothbrush still in its packaging to use to brush his teeth, and Ellen has him write his name on it in Sharpie just in case he ever ends up spending the night again.

The Singer-Harvelle guest room maintains the theme of the outside, looking more like the inside of a hunting cabin in the mountains than part of a mobile home in a dinky trailer park in Kansas. The carpet is neat and vacuumed with a warmly-colored rug laid out across it, and a queen bed occupies the biggest of the space, dressed in thick-looking blankets and a practical two pillows.

Dean strips out of his jeans and folds them, setting them atop the set of drawers that takes up what little space that the bed does not. Castiel follows suit, discarding his coat and jeans in the same area, and climbing into the bed in his underwear, t-shirt, and socks. The heat from their bodies combines under the covers and Castiel is warm, very warm.

“Cas?” Dean says, voice quiet. He rolls around to face Castiel.

“Mm?”

“I don’t wanna be screwed up,” he says, “I wanna be normal. But I – I gotta take care of everybody, ‘cause that’s my job. Gotta take care of dad and I gotta take care of Sammy. But I’m tired and I just wish – wish I wasn’t so fucking hopeless.”

“You’re not hopeless,” Castiel says.
“Yeah, well, I suck at school,” replies Dean.

“Is that what you and your dad were fighting about?” asks Castiel.

Dean hesitates for a second and then nods to the dark, “My grades are really shitty right now and he saw and just – lost it. It feels like I’m fucking everything up and I don’t know how to stop it.”

“You’re doing the best that you can,” Castiel reasons.

“Yeah?” Dean says, and his self-deprecating smile twists up his face into something ugly, “My best kind of sucks, then.”

“Dean,” Castiel softly says, and edges forward just a little. He doesn’t want to get too close and make things awkward, but Dean doesn’t seem to be on the same page, because he shifts over too, and presses his face into Castiel’s chest.

“I just wish I was normal,” Dean mumbles into Cas’ t-shirt.

“Well, you’re not,” Cas says.

“Thanks, Cas. Real comforting.”

“When I think about it, you’re actually remarkably weird,” Castiel adds, and Dean pulls back from Castiel’s chest and opens his mouth like he has something to say, but Cas stops him with a shake of his head, and goes on, “But I’m pretty certain that I’m even weirder. I’m happy I have somebody to be weird and screwed up with me…because – for a while, Dean – I thought it was just me.”

Dean stares for a moment, green eyes unreadable. Then, he settles his head back against Castiel’s chest and manhandles him into wrapping his arms around Dean’s middle.

Against the fabric of Castiel’s t-shirt, Dean mumbles, “Glad I got your weird, screwed-up ass.”

Castiel laughs, “Thanks.”

A moment later a fist bangs against the door of the guest bedroom and Ellen’s voice calls at them, “Boys, if you don’t get your asses to sleep I’m comin’ in there and sleepin’ between you, you understand?”

“Sorry Ellen,” Dean says, at the same time that Castiel says, “Sorry, Ms. Harvelle.”

“You best be sorry,” she mutters through the door, and a beat later, they hear the sound of another door swinging open and closed.

Castiel looks down and sees Dean smiling. He resists the urge to kiss that stupid smile off of Dean’s stupid face and says softly, “I’m happy I have your weird, screwed-up ass, too.”

X

A loud THUNK jolts Castiel out of sleep, where he’s comfortably wrapped in a quilt on his bunk.

“The fuck?” Gabriel sleepily complains from across the bedroom, and on the bunk above Castiel’s, Balthazar groans and shifts. Andy, as he tends to, remains asleep despite the commotion.

“Cas?”

Castiel sluggishly moves up into a sitting position and rubs the sleep from his eyes. He says, “Dean?”
“For fuck’s sake,” Gabriel moans, “can we not do the feelings fiesta at,” – he grapples for his phone and illuminates the screen for the time – “two eighteen in the goddamn morning? I need my beauty rest, douchewads.”

“Eat me,” Dean says back.

“Maybe later, big boy,” Gabriel manages, though his voice is still sleep-muddled.

“C’mon, Cas,” Dean says.

Castiel doesn’t question it. He gropes around for his hoodie and zips it over his torso before he crosses the room to retrieve his shoes. He follows Dean out the window and into the cold night. It’s February and nighttime is freezing, enough that Castiel wishes that he had his coat to keep out the cold.

“Dean, what’s going on?” Castiel asks.

Dean doesn’t answer. He just keeps walking, and Castiel keeps following. They walk past the trailers and mobile homes and straight toward the strip of swampy land behind the park, to the creek. There, they find Sam wrapped up in a thick, scratchy blanket with a grim expression on his face and a beer in his hands, even though he’s only twelve and said that he didn’t care for the drink. When Castiel treads into the clearing, though, Sam’s face lights up with relief.

Sam greets, “Hey Cas.”

“Hello, Sam,” Castiel says. He sits beside Sam on the cold ground. When Sam opens the edge of his blanket to offer Castiel some of the warmth, he accepts, and scoots in close to hold the blanket tight around both of their shoulders.

“Our dad got laid off,” Dean says.

“What?” Castiel says.

“Laid off. No longer needed. The station’s making cutbacks and dad was expendable,” Dean shrugs, “Came home drunk as hell and took a swing at Sammy. Was out the door again after that, so we came out here. We don’t want to be there when he gets back.”

“Why didn’t you go to Bobby’s?” he asks.

“Because dad’ll kill us if Bobby finds out about his job from us,” Dean says, exasperated, “He – he fucking loved that job, okay? Kept him okay, putting baddies away for people ‘cause he couldn’t fucking catch the dude that did mom in.”

“He wasn’t okay,” argues Sam, voice more heated than Castiel has ever heard it before.

“Shut up,” Dean snaps, “He was. It’s better than it would have been if he didn’t have the job. He’s trying, Sam.”

“He’s a mean old drunk,” Sam says back, “You’re the one that takes care of me. He’s just…there.”

“Don’t say that,” Dean says, “Dad takes care of us.”

“Guys,” Castiel finally interjects, “Why did you take me out here?”

“Because,” Dean says, straightening his spine and levelling his chin, “I’m dropping out of school.”
“What?” Sam says. Apparently this is news to everyone. He says, “Dean, you can’t do that. You have to graduate and go to college, all the stuff that you told me I have to do!”

Dean laughs but the chuckle is an empty sound, and stirs up an icky feeling inside Castiel’s gut. He grabs at the back of his neck and focuses on his feet before he lifts his eyes back to them again. This time they’re sad. He says, “That was never the way it was gonna go. We both know that, Sammy. College – that’s what you’re gonna do, okay? You’re the smart one.”

“You’re smart,” Sam says.

“Dean,” adds Castiel, voice soft.

“You’re not gonna convince me otherwise,” Dean says, “I’ve already been talking to Bobby about doing this. He’s giving me more hours at the yard working in the shop. I’m good at cars. I can do shit with my hands, and I make good money doing it. I can take care of us that way. So that’s what I’m gonna do. I just…wanted you guys to know.”

Sam looks like he wants to bicker more.

So Cas makes sure that he speaks up first. He wiggles out of the itchy blanket and stands up, wobbling a little on his feet. He stumbles forward into Dean and hugs him tight, clapping him on the back before he pulls away. He says, “Whatever you feel is right – I support that. Okay?”

Somehow at Dean’s words, he knew that this is how it was always going to be. He’s watched Dean grow more tired every morning that he drives Sam and Castiel to school, has seen his grades drop to nothing and the mischief that Castiel’s always known to be in his face slowly drain away. The only times that Cas has seen Dean happy have been either at Singer Salvage Yard, with Lisa, or in those little moments when it’s just Dean and Cas and they’re out and about – most likely doing something stupid.

“Sometimes things don’t happen the way that we think they’re supposed to,” Castiel says when Dean doesn’t reply.

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, and clutches the back of his neck.

Behind them, Sam abandons his can of beer and comes forward to hug both of them, skinny arms gripping them tight, face nestled in between both their chests.

“You’re my favorite brother,” Sam says.

Dean snorts, “I’m your only brother. That means I’m your least favorite, too.”

“Maybe. But right now you’re my favorite.”

Dean’s increase in hours at the salvage yard turns out to be for the best – John makes no sign of using his few months on the pittance of his severance pay to find a new job and Dean carries the extra weight left behind. He still drives Sam and Castiel to school but leaves for work immediately afterward. He picks them up during his lunch breaks, and they all eat in the break room at the shop, usually sandwiches that Ellen made. On Fridays, Bobby springs for takeout, and they enjoy pizzas with pooling grease and dripping cheese or scallion pancakes and spring rolls from a local hole-in-the-wall Chinese joint.

More importantly, even though Dean remains more serious-faced than he was when he and Castiel
met, he laughs more easily and frets less about the balance of his life. At Singer Salvage Dean knows who he is.

With the return of Dean’s laughter comes a new easiness for Castiel. His own grades rise as the hyper-concern for his best friend drains away into regular-old, general worry (“Dean, are you certain it’s wise to eat this many burgers in one sitting?” or “You’re using protection, right? The last thing I need is to be an uncle at sixteen.” These, in turn, are answered with, “I will eat as many burgers as I damn well please,” and “Jesus, Cas, I’m not that stupid.”).

It figures, then, that something should go wrong.

Castiel is mid-grope with his hand stuck down the front of Balthazar’s unbuttoned jeans when the bedroom door bangs open and reveals Dean as the culprit.

“Oh, Jesus,” Dean says, but he doesn’t make a move to back away from them and let them finish what they started.

Balthazar heaves a sigh and rolls away from Castiel and stretches his arms behind his head, an irritable expression on his face as he says, “You know, your parents should really have named you Cockblock. It seems it would have been more appropriate than Dean.”

In a streak of misfortune, Castiel isn’t nearly as decent as Balthazar, who only has a clear tent at the front of his undone jeans and his t-shirt rucked up. He, sadly, has his jeans around his ankles, his cock halfway out of his underwear, and no shirt to be seen.

“Are you serious, Dean?” asks Cas, “Can I at least finish here? I let you and Lisa finish that one time—”

“It’s important,” Dean says, and though he very clearly attempts to avoid staring at Cas in his indecent state, fails miserably.

Castiel exhales and shifts into a sitting position. He tucks his now half-hard cock back into his underwear and adjusts it so the arousal isn’t so obvious, then bending to pull his jeans back up and button them low on his waist. He can’t find where his t-shirt went and so he collects a fresh one. The t-shirt on the top of the stack in Castiel’s drawer happens to be an AC/DC shirt that Dean passed onto him when his shoulders got too big to justify wearing it anymore. He wiggles into it, and tries not dwell on how it still smells like Dean just a little. In the confines of his jeans, his dick twitches with renewed interest.

“You,” Cas says to Balthazar, pointing a finger in his direction, “We are not done here.”

Balthazar winks and replies, “I’ll be waiting, handsome.”

“Flirt,” Cas accuses.

“Scoundrel.”

“Did you just call me a scoundrel?”

“I believe anyone that leaves a man before he fucks him is at least a little bit of a scoundrel, Castiel,” Balthazar haughtily replies.

Castiel snorts and says, “This isn’t over,” before he turns to shove his feet into shoes, sans socks, and follow Dean out of the bedroom.
“Dean, what the hell is so important that you had to interrupt me with my pants literally down around my ankles –”

“Lisa broke up with me,” Dean says.

Castiel stills and says, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, and exhales, “I mean. I kinda saw it coming. But it just sucks, you know? Lisa’s great, and I liked her a lot. I don’t usually like people that much, but I liked her that much, and she just wasn’t feeling it anymore. Goddamnit, she even gave me the ‘it’s not you, it’s me,’ line. That’s my fuckin’ line, Cas. Mine.”

Castiel eyes Raph where he sits at the computer a few feet away from them and suggests, “Let’s go get some slushies.”

“Yeah. Okay,” Dean agrees. He waits silently while Castiel pulls his coat over his shoulders and wraps the scarf and hat that Mama Missouri made for him around himself, the yarn soft and comforting against the biting wind that assaults them as soon as they step out.

“So, what – she broke up with you because she wasn’t into you anymore?” asks Cas, “Like, that’s all? You didn’t even talk about it?”

“I dunno,” Dean says, and shoves his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket as they walk toward the nearby 7-11. His shoulders hunch and he continues, “We were kind of fighting a lot. You know her dad never liked me, and I guess whatever crap he was saying to her finally got to her head. Fuck. I mean, I guess he’s right. Who the fuck wants to date a trailer trash, mechanic drop out?”

Castiel resists the temptation to reply to that question with, I would, and instead responds, “I assume that question in rhetorical, since you have plenty of women clamoring to date you.”

“Have sex with me, you mean,” Dean corrects, “It’s not the same thing. Whatever. I guess I’m just not really good at dating. I fuck it up every time.”

“It sounds to me like Lisa was the reason it wasn’t working,” Castiel reasons, “If her father is the source of the issue, and you said she is saying her feelings weren’t in it anymore. Maybe it is for the best, if those were the case.”

“That wasn’t all,” Dean says, “There was more bullshit she said when she dumped my ass and I just – I kind of don’t want to talk about it, but it’s really fucking with me, okay?”

“Okay,” Castiel says, and shoves aside his curiosity.

At the 7-11, they each purchase jumbo slushies and mix flavors together for “maximum delicious” as Dean says. They sit on the curb outside the back door of the building and hold a face off for who can drink their slushie the fastest. Castiel wins, as he always does, because, in Dean’s words, he “is a robot immune to brain freezes.”

By the time they finish both of them are frozen to the bone, and hasten to return to Sugar Lane. There, they make powdered hot cocoa in Mama’s home, and curl up in the den while Anna watches Criminal Minds. As soon as she finishes, they take command of the television and watch Super 8 tucked up in blankets with a small bounty of snacks smuggled from the pantry.

No one is surprised when Sam comes looking for Dean, and they all settle in to enjoy the movie marathon until Mama calls them all out for dinner. Dean seems to be in better humor after he gets a pork chop and some crispy potatoes in his stomach.
Still, he’s the most downtrodden that Castiel has seen him since he stopped going to school. When Castiel tries to wrap his arm around Dean’s shoulders when they return to the den, Dean shrugs him off and scoots away, and Cas’ stomach feels sick.

“Dean, are you gonna be okay?” Castiel finally asks at the end of the night, when Dean and Sam collectively decide that they should return home.

Dean blows all of the air out of his lungs and runs his hands back through his hair. He shrugs his shoulders before he replies, “I dunno. Probably. Charlie’s supposed to be doing this thing later this week that I’m gonna go to, so at least I’m getting out, you know? Anyway, I need time to work my crap out. Don’t wanna take anything out on you.”

“Take what out?” asks Sam, “Take what out on Cas?”

“None of your beeswax, Sammy,” Dean firmly states, shoving his little brother aside, and turns back to Castiel, “Anyway, I’ll see you around, all right?”

“All right,” Cas agrees.

X

Castiel does not see Dean around.

Instead, it seems like Dean expends as much effort as possible trying to avoid Cas. He can’t avoid taking Castiel to and from school, but he drops him off at Mama Missouri’s every day instead of letting him hang around at the salvage yard, claiming that he “has a lot of crap to get done.”

Castiel tries his best to take it in stride. He keeps his mind occupied with homework and thinks about joining the art club so that he has more things to do. Besides, that would look good on college applications as an extracurricular – something he has to consider now that sophomore year is coming closer and closer to ending and he’ll be a junior. He’s told that’s when everything starts to seem more real, that one era of his life will be ending and another will begin.

Still, that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t hurt to be ignored and shuffled off to the side by his best friend-slash-embarrassing crush. After all the years of bullshit that he’s been through, he’s skilled at compartmentalizing, but Dean is somehow different. His presence bleeds into other places in Castiel’s mind, making his skull hurt to bursting and his stomach churn with a gritty, lonely feeling.

Balthazar helps in the distraction efforts, though they have limited time with their foster brothers’ constant presence. They’ve managed to get in a couple of quick hand jobs, and on Wednesday Balthazar backs Castiel into the bathroom and sucks him off against the towel rack.

Everything goes smoothly until Friday evening. After Dean tells him he can’t hang out because he has Charlie’s event to go to, Castiel resigns himself to boredom and collapses in his bunk with a book in his hands. He tries not to feel left out and fails miserably, scowling into the pages of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.

Until Gabriel comes banging into the bedroom, that is. He has his cellphone up to his ear and his theater bag in his hand, and looks agitated beyond belief. He snarks something to the person on the other line before he notices that he isn’t alone in the bedroom, and his eyes land on Cas.

“Castiel!” he says, in the same tone a cartoon scientist might say *Eureka!*

“Uh, yes?”
“You know all the words to the songs in Rocky Horror, don’t you?” he asks, and then holds up his hand before Castiel can answer and says, “Of course you do. We’ve all heard you jamming out in the shower.”

“What do you want, Gabriel?” he asks.

“I need a favor,” he says, expression morphing to one of pleading. “Please please please help me out here, kid.”

“I’m not saying yes until I know what you want,” Castiel answers carefully. This, though, is the first time that Gabriel has ever asked for his assistance with something, so it must be important. Gabriel, all idiosyncrasies aside, has always occurred to Cas as somebody that likes to do things his own way, and on his own, period.

Gabriel inhales and says, “Okay. First off. If you do this for me, I will be forever in your debt. Not like, ‘I’ll suck your dick’ forever in your debt, though. I’m not Dean, for God’s sake.”

“Get to the point.”

“Maybe more like, ‘I’ll spring for Mickey D’s for your lunch for a week’ kind of in your debt,” Gabriel goes on.

“Gabe!”

“Okay, okay,” he says, and the person that he is still on the phone with must say something too, because Gabriel says into the receiver, “Don’t get your panties in a twist, okay? I think I might have a solution – Okay, so, Cas. You know all the words to every song in Rocky Horror. I do this thing sometimes at the drive-in when they show Rocky Horror – a bunch of us get dressed up and we sing the songs and put on the performance live. Anyway, a couple of our guys are AWOL right now and…”

“And what?” Castiel says, book now closed and resting on his legs.

“And we need a Frank-N-Furter,” concludes Gabriel, “Please, kid, our guys are fucking nowhere and we can’t do the thing without Doctor Frank-N-Furter.”

Castiel sets his Harry Potter book aside and asks, “Let me get this straight. You want me, me, to dress up in heels and makeup and get on stage.”

“Well,” Gabriel says, “Also a corset and some thigh highs. Please?” – and then into the phone – “No, I’m not going to offer to suck his dick. I don’t fucking care how dire it is, I’m not sucking my foster brother’s dick. You may as well just slap an accent on me and call me Balthazar if you –”

“Nobody is sucking anybody’s dick,” Castiel says, exasperated, “I’ll do it.”

“What?” says Gabe, brows high on his forehead.

“I said I’ll do it,” Castiel says.

“He says he’ll do it,” Gabriel says into the phone, “I know! I should totally suck his dick.”

X

Kali drives them to the event in her parents’ car, an early 2000s model Toyota if his time with Dean at the salvage yard’s shop has taught him anything. She’s wearing a cheap, Halloween-store French
maid costume, which Castiel doesn’t bother to question. She must play Magenta, though her hair doesn’t seem nearly as poofy as it should be for the role.

“Wait, what character do you play?” he asks Gabriel, as they turn out of Sugar Lane.

Kali cocks one well-plucked brow and asks, “Isn’t it obvious?”

“I’m Riff Raff, duh,” Gabriel says.


“Yes?” Neither are you, Gabe replies, “We change there, dingbat. Kali just doesn’t like getting naked in front of Luke. He’s our Rocky, and he’s kind of a wad, but what can you do? Do you know how many men there are in Kansas willing to wear nothing but a gold speedo on stage? Very few, my friend.”

When they pull up to the drive-in, Chuck leans his head in and grins, “Hey lovebirds. You’re a little late tonight. Whoa, Cas, what are you doing with these fruitcakes?”

“Fuck you, Chuck,” Kali says, lifting one, obscene manicured finger.

“He’s our Frank-N-Furter tonight,” grins Gabriel.

“I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter,” adds Castiel.

Chuck whistles, “Good luck, guys. You can go ahead and pull around to the back.”

Kali takes the Toyota to an area of the drive-in that Castiel has never seen before – the back office. She parks between a beaten-up green van and a crappy car with a Doctor Who sticker (“My other car is a TARDIS”) that he intends to tell Charlie about later.

“Guys, you’re here!” someone exclaims, as soon as they get into the room. On most days, it must serve as a regular office, though now costumes and makeup litter it from wall to wall. It smells like powder and paint, and there are far too many people inside it for them to be lawfully following the fire code.

“Cas, what are you doing here?”

He turns and sees one Charlie Bradbury.

Oh.

Oh, no.

This is Charlie’s thing, which means that Dean is going to be here tonight. Dean is going to see him in panties and thigh highs. He expects to feel a rise of panic at the revelation, but instead what comes is frustration. He would have loved to come to this with Dean tonight, and Dean knows that he would have loved that. Dean is ignoring him.

Dean is being a dick.

The obvious solution left is to put on the best damn show – or only show – of his life.

“He’s our replacement Frank-N-Furter,” Gabriel says, and claps Castiel on the shoulder, “Girlie, can you make him pretty?”
“Of course,” Charlie says, mouth falling into a smile, “You know who you’re talking to, big boy?”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Gabriel says, face lighting up with a million-dollar grin.

Charlie parks him down on a rolling office chair and slaps open a makeup kit. She orders, “Take off your shirt. We don’t want you to ruin your face by taking it off later.” Castiel obeys.

The next minutes are a slurry of brushes and liners and mascara glopping his eyelashes, the last of which makes Castiel tear up. Intermittently, Charlie puts finishing touches on the faces of others, and works on her own makeup. Her gold sequins and crazily-drawn eyeliner brows indicate that she can only be one character: Columbia. It’s so obvious Castiel doesn’t know how he didn’t see it before.

Gabriel tosses costume pieces at him – a dark, sparkly corset and matching garter belt, thigh high stockings, and a jumbo package of silky, black women’s underwear. He looks around for a space with any semblance of privacy, and, finding none, strips off his jeans and underwear in one fell swoop. He rips open the package of panties and pulls them up over his narrow hips. The fabric is cool and soft, much better than he expected it to be. He actually kind of likes them.

Charlie has to help Castiel with lacing the corset and Kali has to help with clipping the garter belt to his stockings, her nose wrinkled the whole time. They don’t have time to make his hair curly at all, but Charlie arranges his hair into something more artful with clever hands and a tube of hair gel.

“All right, kiddies!” Gabriel, whose hair is slicked back and sprayed with yellowish spray dye, and whose eyes are shaded with eye shadow all the way around, “It’s show time.”

X

Castiel is so nervous he could throw up. He watches as their Brad, Michael, sings to their Janet – Gilda, and feels intimidated. Both of them are so good in their roles, and Castiel has never been on a stage in his life. Sure, he watches Rocky Horror religiously and plays the soundtrack on repeat for hours, and yeah, he can sure as hell put on a show in the shower – but that’s the shower, it’s not a stage, with a bunch of people sitting on blankets and on the hoods of their cars, dressed up and laughing and watching them.

“Nervous?” Charlie asks.

Wide-eyed, he turns back and nods.

“Don’t be,” she says, and adjusts his microphone so it sits more comfortably against his ear, “I know you know the words. I can’t believe I didn’t think of you before when we were all in a panic. You’re perfect. And damn sexy. I want you to repeat that for me.”

“I’m perfect?” Castiel says.

“And?”

“And I’m damn sexy,” he says, without much confidence.

“One more time,” Charlie says.

“And I’m damn sexy,” he says.

“Much better.”

He looks on as Gabriel and Kali lead in singing The Time Warp. He knows Gabriel acts in the
Smoky Bluff musicals and plays and that Mama always goes to see them, but he’s never seen Gabriel himself, like this. Gabriel takes his role seriously, and the way he sings sends shivers down Castiel’s spine.

Or that could be the fact that he’s wearing a corset and thigh high stockings when it’s fuck-all degrees outside.

Too soon, it’s his turn to go on. Somebody has to push him on, and he stumbles at first. The movie plays behind him, and at first he can’t get the words out of his throat. But then he sees Gabriel and Charlie giving him subtle thumbs up and smiles, and he struts the rest of the way. He belts out the words to *Sweet Transvestite*, the same way he sings them in the shower when he’s all alone. A smile stretches his lipstick-painted lips, and he moves his hips the way that Frank-N-Furter would.

For the first time this week, he feels wholly good. He feels like himself. This may be a strange sentiment to occur to him whilst wearing a sparkly corset, but he’s too busy having fun to care. He dances like no one is watching him, and the people that are there in reality cheer him on and clap and holler. It feels amazing, like a different kind of high, sending happiness and through his veins and making him breathless.

Castiel goes through each part with glee, through the costume changes and the scenes with Gilda and Michael.

The ending hits him so powerfully that he cries during *I’m Going Home*, exactly like Tim Curry does in the movie. But he’s laughing again by the time that they take their bows to the drive-in patrons. Castiel bows hand-in-hand with Gabriel and Kali and applies a kiss directly to Luke’s lips in front of everybody.

He can’t stop laughing, even as they all head toward the back office to change into their regular clothes and remove the makeup from their faces. Charlie drapes her arm around Castiel’s shoulders and tells him what a great job he did, while Gabriel claps his hand onto Castiel’s shoulder and congratulates him on the performance. Luke winks at him and Gilda’s smiling, and Castiel feels like he’s a part of something good. It’s a welcome change from the slew of shit that the week brought.

And a welcome change that lasts only until they reach the office, it turns out.

Dean leans on the wall just outside the door of the office, and waves when he sees them coming. Charlie greets him with an enthusiastic hug and he hugs back, telling her how much he liked it and how he has to watch the movie with her again sometime. The other cast members file past and into the office to change, but when Castiel moves to follow them, Dean stops him.

“Hey, Cas, can I have a word?” he says, voice quiet and serious.

Castiel wants to tell Dean that he can wait to have his word until after he’s out of his lingerie and makeup, but the costume seems to unsettle Dean so he shrugs and says, “Why not?”

They move from the front door to the side of the small building, near where the cast members’ cars are parked. Dean rakes a hand through his hair, and Castiel folds his arms over his corset to try and protect himself against the cold.

“Look, I was a dick this week,” Dean says.

“Yes. That’s true,” Castiel agrees.

“Um, so,” Dean says, and looks paler as his words stutter and falter.
“Um, so…” Castiel prods.

Very suddenly, Dean is much closer to him than he should be. He backs Castiel up against the outer wall of the office building and boxes him in with long limbs. He smells like leather and soap and everything good that Castiel loves about him. His body is warm and the scent of spearmint lingers on his breath. It’s intoxicating, and Castiel can’t help but freeze, overwhelmed by everything –

and then Dean kisses him.

He kisses Castiel like he’s starving for it, his lips rough and unrelenting, tongue licking inside his mouth before Castiel can even comprehend what’s happening. Dean tastes like everything good, minty and masculine and arousing, all the things Castiel knew he would taste when this moment finally came.

Then Dean’s hot palm finds its way between Castiel’s legs and cups his cock, rubbing the heel of his hand against it until Castiel moans into his mouth.

Dean’s face is flushed with arousal when he pulls back, pink high on the apples of his cheeks, making his freckles stand out on his skin. His eyes are heavy-lidded and his pupils blown wide, his breath coming in quick, soft pants.

Castiel might need his Albuterol.

When Dean’s hand starts moving along the silky outside of his panties, playing with the length of Castiel’s erection through the fabric, he mentally corrects: Castiel will definitely need his Albuterol.

“I’ve always wanted to try something like this,” Dean mutters against the skin of Castiel’s neck.

The magic is gone in an instant.

Dean has always wanted to try something like this? Always wanted to play around? Of course he wants to play around with Castiel. Of course that’s all that he wants from him.

Cas presses his palms against Dean’s chest and shoves.

“Cas, what the hell?” Dean asks.

“Always wanted to try something like me, huh?” Castiel snaps. And the anger grows. It starts to tower and bloom, filling him with fire and frustration and every bad feeling in the universe. He feels like he’s burning up from the inside. He starts to shout at Dean, pushing him back with every step, “I’m not a fucking experiment, Dean!”

“That’s not –”

“Shut up,” Castiel says, “Just shut up. I don’t care if you want to mess around with men. Trust me, I’m the last person to care. But don’t – don’t do that to me. I’m your best friend and even if my feelings don’t matter to you, being your best friend sure as hell should.”

“Your feelings?” Dean weakly echoes.

“Yes, Dean. My feelings. The ones I’ve had for you for forever, because I enjoy self-flagellation and wallowing in my own misery. Those feelings,” Castiel grinds out, “You wanna jerk some poor kid around because you want to experiment with your latent homosexuality? Fine. That’s great. But don’t do it to me.”
With that, Castiel turns and clicks away, walking quickly but crookedly, because he’s no good in high heels.

“Cas, wait—”

He pries open the back office door and slams it behind him before Dean can say another damn word.
Chapter Notes

Warning for a homophobic slur

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Track: Sweet Dreams – Eurythmics

Hold Your Head Up

When the office door slams behind him, the room goes quiet.

“Cas?” Charlie says.

“What happened with lover boy?” asks Gabriel, smirk tilting his lips.

“Shut up, Gabriel,” snaps Castiel. The confidence that his Frank-N-Furter costume pieces instilled in him on stage vanishes, and suddenly he feels like a clown, like a child playing dress up. The inside of the corset itches. His face feels heavy under the makeup. His feet ache and burn from the heels strapped onto them.

He shoves past his friends and the other cast members to retrieve his clothes.

“What happened?” Charlie says, as he throws the awful shoes aside. His feet hurt a little less without them on, but his soles still feel stretched out and used. Hell, his entire body feels stretched out and used.

Castiel never wanted it to be this way. He fantasized about Dean wanting him, sure. He’d kept a few ideas tucked up away in the back of his mind, locked up and only allowed out during the most secluded masturbations. He thought of Dean cupping his face and kissing him, thought of Dean whispering in his ear that it was him that he’d wanted all along. He thought about how Dean would tell him how nice he looked when he was naked, how good he felt when they fucked.

What he’d never imagined was Dean treating him like a toy. Always wanted to try something like him, indeed.

Castiel throws the thigh high stockings and garter belt without looking to see where they fall. To avoid further humiliation he doesn’t bother to remove the panties – just keeps them on as he jerks his jeans up over his legs and buttons them. But when his fingers move to undo the lacing of the corset, his hands shake too much, and Charlie rushes forward to help him.

He doesn’t realize that he’s crying until then.

“Please tell me what happened,” Charlie softly says.

Castiel can only manage, “He kissed me.”

“What’s the big deal, then? Isn’t that what you wanted, dummy?” asks Gabriel.
Castiel didn’t know that his foster brother was hovering so close to him, and with the presence feels suffocated, suffocated and angrier than he thought that he could possibly be. He whirls around and shouts, “I told you to shut up. He didn’t kiss me because he wanted me, he kissed me because he wanted to play around. He just wanted a warm male body to stick his dick into and did it matter that that was me? No, it did not. So just shut up, Gabriel. Just shut up and leave me alone.”

He tears the corset off the rest of the way and throws it onto the floor, yanking his t-shirt and coat on as quickly as he can manage. Castiel feels the eyes of everyone in the room on him, burning into him like lit cigarettes applied to the skin. He shoves his feet into his sneakers without lacing them, and throws the door to the building open to storm out of it.

It figures that Dean would still be waiting for him outside.

At the sight of Cas stomping down out of the back office building, he steps forward and starts, “Cas, please listen –”

“No,” Castiel says, “No, you listen to me, Dean Winchester. I trusted you. I don’t trust people! My whole entire life, I’ve been trained out of trusting anyone. But I trusted you, because you’re my best friend. And you took advantage of that. So fuck you! And leave me alone. I don’t want to speak to you again.”

Castiel shoves past Dean and makes his way toward the road. He doesn’t know exactly how to get back to Sugar Lane by walking, but he can figure it out. He doesn’t want to talk to anybody right now, doesn’t want anybody to see him like this.

Because this? This is pathetic. He’s a sobbing mess, eyeliner and mascara bleeding down his face in black globs, the tears rolling down his cheeks and landing on his shirt, staining the fabric. His other homes, including the home that he was born into, taught him how to cry. They taught him the reality of the world. He grew up knowing how cruel people really could be, and this place destroyed every ounce of strength that he’d built inside himself to protect from that cruelty.

Brick by brick the people in this town tore down everything he’d built up. Missouri threw an entire wrecking ball into the structure, shaking it down with home-cooked meals and hugs and *groundings*. Sugar Lane thrust so many extremes upon him. No place has ever terrified as much, or made him feel as safe.

And Dean. Dean disintegrated the mortar between each brick of strength inside him, sent them crumbling to the ground and wriggled his way inside. He curled up inside Castiel’s heart, and while Castiel knew that Dean had made himself at home there, he didn’t know that it would end so badly.

Or maybe he did know.

Things always end badly for him. That’s what the logical part of his brain said, but after a while he told that part of his brain to be quiet, to let him bask in the little slice of heaven that he’d found here, to let him linger in the home he’d carved out for himself.

He should have known better than to listen to his heart.

And now everything is wrong.

“Castiel!”

Castiel looks sharply up from where his sneakers smack against the pavement. Kali’s old Toyota slows to a stop beside him, the headlights bright and blinding. Gabriel leans out the window, yellow spray dye still in his hair and makeup still ringed around his eyes.
“Go away,” he says, and wraps his arms around himself.

“Get in the car, kiddo,” Gabriel says, with equal finality.

“No,” Castiel replies, “I’m walking home. I don’t need you.”

“Yes, you do,” Gabriel says, “You need me, and you’re gonna get in the damn car. We’re gonna go home, okay? It’ll be okay.”

“It’s not going to be okay!” shouts Castiel, “Nothing is going to be ‘okay.’ I’m fucked up and I’m an idiot, and I was so fucking stupid that I let myself believe I had a goddamn friend. Why am I so screwed up?”

“Because you got screwed,” Gabriel says, “and that’s okay. You think I’m okay? I’m not fucking okay. I mean, is anybody okay? My parents got hooked on meth and stopped giving a shit about me. Raph’s dad is in the slammer for killing his mom. Hester’s uncle tried to fuck her, and she’s not even nine goddamn years old. And Balthie? His parents were normal as fuck, but they bit it in a car accident and the system bent him over same as you and me. Everyone at Mama’s is fucking screwed beyond any normal sense of the word, and fuck, kid. That’s all right. Now get in the car.”

A hot wave of fresh tears flows and Castiel wipes his nose on the sleeve of his jacket. He wants to tell Gabriel to go screw himself, but when he opens his mouth to say the words, they don’t come out. Instead, all he manages is a pained sob and a pitiful, “Okay.”

Castiel pries open the back door to the Toyota and climbs in. Kali doesn’t even wait until he’s buckled to start driving. He can’t imagine how awkward this must be for her.

Gabriel turns around in his seat and says, “Look, kiddo. All the kids that make it to Mama – they’re a mess. All of us got fucked six ways Sunday before we hit our damn eighteenth birthdays. But we all got Mama, and we all got each other. We take of our own, all right?”

Castiel nods and muffles another pained gasp. In between his tears he fumbles with the pocket of his jeans and pulls out his inhaler to take a dose of medicine. The last thing this night needs is a trip to the hospital because he’s too dumb to take care of his asthma on top of everything else he’s been dumb about.

The rest of the car ride back to Sugar Lane is silent. Kali drops them off in front of Mama’s mobile homes before she turns around to park outside her own trailer. She kisses Gabriel on the cheek before he climbs out, but doesn’t say anything to Castiel. Castiel is relieved.

“C’mere,” Gabe says, and nudges Castiel away from the boys’ home.

“What are you –”

“We’re gonna go see Mama,” Gabriel says. He herds Castiel to Mama’s trailer and pushes him inside first.

No sooner has Gabriel made Castiel sit at the kitchen table and switched the kitchen light on than Mama is out to see what’s going on, eyes squinting against the light. She’s wear a robe, slippers and a scowl – but the last vanishes entirely at the sight of Castiel.

“Honey, what is going on?” she asks.

Cas tries to speak, but no words come out. Just more tears. He wipes his face onto the sleeve of his coat, smearing mascara and tears and snot every which way. He’s glad that he doesn’t have a mirror
to see how terrible he must look.

Gabriel pokes his head out of the kitchen and says one word: “Dean.”

“Oh Lord,” Missouri breathes, “What did that child do?”

“I’m not clear on the details, but I’ve gathered it involved kissing and Dean doing something stupid,” Gabriel says. Castiel’s glad to have his foster brother as his voice box, because even if he wanted to explain tonight’s humiliation to Missouri, he doesn’t think that his voice would work.

“That sounds about right,” murmurs Mama, “You wanna talk about it?”

Castiel shakes his head.

Gabriel’s voice echoes from the kitchen, “Hey Mama, where did you put that peppermint junk?”

“Tea’s in the cabinet above the fridge,” she says.

There’s some clanging from the other room. Mama pads forward to Castiel and offers one soft hand. She says, “How about you come sit on the couch with me?”

Castiel swallows and sniffles. He hesitates, thinking that trust is how he got himself in this situation in the first place. But one look at Missouri’s kind eyes has him putting his hand in hers, and letting himself be pulled into the living room. Missouri sits him on the couch beside her bookshelf and crosses the room to collect a box of Kleenex, which she sets beside Castiel before she takes the space on his other side. She wraps her arm around his shoulder.

At first he wants to push her away, but his body moves before his brain. He curls into Mama Missouri’s body and cries a little more, snuffling into a wad of tissues while she runs her hand over his back.

“That damn boy,” she murmurs, “I don’t know what happened, and I am one hundred percent sure that Dean did something dumb, but you gotta know he probably knows what he did is dumb by now, sugar. You two are the best friends I have ever seen, and I don’t think either of you is gonna give that up easy.”

The shadows in the room shift, and Gabriel presses a hot mug in between Castiel’s hands. Fragrant steam curls out of it, smelling of peppermint and herbs. He says, “I’m gonna go get this crap out of my hair, but I’ll stay up, okay?”

“Okay,” mutters Castiel. He inhales the steam of the tea and takes a sip. He does feel better at the taste and warmth of it, and at the pressure of Mama Missouri’s hand rubbing his back.

While he drinks the tea, Mama reaches over and pulls one of the tissues from the box on Castiel’s other side. She tips his chin up and dabs at his face, running under his eyes and over his cheeks. She says, “I bet you looked real nice before you cried this all off, hmm?”

At that, Castiel manages a choked laugh and a nod.

Mama Missouri smiles him and runs a hand through his gelled-up hair. She says, “You sweet boy. I know you worked real hard to make sure no one would hurt you like this. I also know that Dean probably didn’t mean to hurt you. You know Dean better than almost anybody, honey. You know what a good heart he’s got. I bet you also know how confused he’s gotta be.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Castiel says gruffly to his tea.
“I mean,” Mama says, voice serious, “That I have watched that boy chase girls since before he was old enough to go to school. He been chasin’ tail long as he can remember, but that tail ain’t never belonged to a boy before. Then you come along and he’s feelin’ all fuzzy over somebody he didn’t know he could feel fuzzy for. That’s gonna be confusing as all hell, no matter how you look at it.”

“I don’t think Dean feels…fuzzy for me,” Castiel says.

Mama lifts a brow and pats his back, “Oh you don’t, huh?”

“…No.”

“Well, we’ll just see how you two boys work that out,” she says, “and there’s somethin’ else I want you to know. You’re gonna get hurt, no matter what I do. But when you get hurt, you can always come to me. I will always be here. And I will always take care of you. Don’t you doubt that for a second.”

“What if I have to leave?”

“Then I’ll fight for you.”

X

Throughout the weekend, Dean attempts to text and call Castiel several times.

Also throughout the weekend, Castiel ignores several phone calls and text messages, which become so abundant that halfway through Sunday he turns off his phone entirely.

Gabriel and Balthazar say that he should talk to Dean, but he doesn’t agree.

And much to Castiel’s chagrin, Balthazar then withholding sex on the grounds that he thinks Dean would provide intercourse if directly asked to.

Castiel is not amused, and fervently disagrees.

On Monday, Castiel takes the bus to school. He forgot how much he hated the bus last year, but remembers all too quickly when he’s hit by the aroma of overcooked fake leather seats and sweaty armpits, and sees Crowley in his usual seat. He sneers at Castiel and Castiel sneers back, taking an empty seat a safe distance away. This, unfortunately, ends with him crammed up beside two freshman boys, one of whom picks at the acne on his nose the entire ride to Smoky Bluff.

It’s a dull day, though the days are often dull since Dean dropped out. Castiel drifts through classes and falls asleep in two, but he wakes up with a start both times when he starts to dream of Dean. At lunchtime, he eats his meal out at The Shed with Meg while she and some of her shifty-looking friends smoke. His sandwich tastes dry and he ends up not being able to finish, appetite vanished.

On his off period, the day goes from boring to bullshit.

Crowley sits across from him, a smug little smile on his face, and folds his hands together. At first, Castiel ignores him. Crowley clears his throat, and Castiel looks up briefly before he returns to his book. Crowley clears his throat again, and at last Castiel relents with a terse, “What?”

“No need to be impolite,” Crowley says, “I just thought I’d come console you.”

“…Okay.”

“I heard you and straight boy Winchester had a falling out,” he says, “That’s too bad. Not that I told
you so or anything. Oh wait – I did.”

Anger bubbles up in Cas’ stomach, but he tries not to let it show. If Crowley knows how furious he still is about Dean’s behavior and the terrible weekend, he’ll never let it go. So he looks back down at his book and tries to read, even though he’s been scanning the same sentence at the top of the page over and over again for the past five minutes.

“I heard you cried,” Crowley goes on, examining his fingernails as he speaks, “Cried crocodile tears for your unrequited love. So tragic, that.”

“Crowley,” Castiel warns.

“It doesn’t surprise me, really,” Crowley hums, “You seem to cry over the smallest things. Remember when you cried at your own birthday party? That was really something. You’re just such a fragile thing, aren’t you?”

“Shut up,” Castiel hisses under his breath, “Just shut up. You don’t know anything, okay? So just leave me alone.”

“Why would I leave you alone when teasing you is so much more fun?”

Castiel does not bother to answer this question, and nor does he bother to reward Crowley for his douchebaggery with eye contact. He stares at the words on the pages in front of him, though now they’re swirling and blurring with how right Crowley is. He wants to shout at Crowley and say that he’s wrong. Castiel isn’t fragile – but of course he’s fragile. Small things do make him cry. He cries when he’s happy and when he’s sad, because he never felt those things that much before Sugar Lane and Smoky Bluff and Lawrence, Kansas. He was jaded and numb and aged beyond his fourteen years, feeling more like fifty than a boy still battling against the gnashing teeth of puberty.

Now he cries at his birthday party and when people say nice things to him, and he cries when his heart breaks. Nothing could get in his stronghold, but now it has, and everything is destroyed.

And now this is going to make him cry, too.

“Oh, no. Going to cry to mummy? Oh, that’s right. I forgot. You don’t have one. My bad,” Crowley says.

Castiel lifts his burning eyes at that and says, “Yes I do.”

“That’s sweet, but you don’t have your mummy Dean anymore,” Crowley tells him, voice all cloying sweetness and condescension.

“I have a mom,” Castiel says, “Her name is Missouri, and you’re an asshole. Eat shit and die, Crowley.”

He slams the cover of his book closed and throws it into his backpack before Crowley can retort with something infinitely more clever than Castiel could come up with. He throws the back over his shoulders and storms out of the school library. He thinks about going to The Shed, but it isn’t private there. People would see the tears threatening to fall and his red and splotchy face.

Instead, Castiel retreats to the boys’ bathroom on the ground floor and locks himself into a stall. He climbs up onto the toilet seat and presses his knees up against his face, sniffling into his jeans. He isn’t truly crying, not yet, but his nose is clogged up with the effort he’s expending trying not to cry, and he can’t breathe. He has to take his Albuterol.
When he shifts up to take his inhaler, graffiti stares back at him on the stall door in neat handwriting.

**FAGGOT NOVAK WILL SUCK DICK FOR $5.**

His tears dry up and a well of rage replaces them.

Sometimes, he wishes that he never came to this place.

\[X\]

At least the day can’t get worse.

He tells himself this and naively allows himself to believe it all the way through the remaining classes of the day. No one pays attention to him in the hallways after the final bell rings, when he hurries to swap out the books in his locker so that he won’t be late for making the bus back to Sugar Lane.

His stomach about drops out of his ass when he makes it outside to the pickup area and sees, just ahead of the line of yellow school busses, a ’67 Chevy Impala.

Against his better judgment, Castiel marches to it. When he knocks on the window, Dean leans over and rolls it down.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Castiel demands, “You should be picking up Sam.”

“Sam’s at that chick Ruby’s house working on some social studies project,” Dean says, “Will you please get in the car?”

“Why should I?”

Dean falters. The broken look that flashes across his face spears Cas’ gut with icy guilt, but he levels his chin and refuses to take his words back. He is owed an explanation at the very least. Dean drums his fingers against the steering wheel, collecting his thoughts, and says, “Because you’re best my friend and I owe you an apology.”

Ah, there it is. Dean’s going to tell him that he shouldn’t have kissed him and they should go back to being normal. The knowledge hurts, but he figures Dean’s friendship is better than no Dean at all, so he nods, “Fine,” and climbs into the passenger seat to Dean’s right.

Relief crosses Dean’s features, but he doesn’t express it aloud. He mutters, “Wanna have this conversation someplace private.”

“Fine,” Castiel repeats.

Dean drives them away from Smoky Bluff and past the turnoff toward Sugar Lane. They drive for a while and without conversation, so Castiel watches the world whip by outside the window, pressing his cheek up against the glass and again wondering how he let himself get into this position. They pull into the parking lot of a park, a park that’s mostly abandoned because of the cold weather. The news this morning reported that it’s supposed to snow in the evening, and the clouds overhead seem to agree with this prediction.

Dean pulls them into a space right along the edge, away from the two other vehicles in the lot, and shuts off the engine. He inhales deeply before he looks at Castiel, and then says, “I. Um. I got this for you.”

Clutched in Dean’s sweaty fist is a single, white flower. Castiel takes it and stares at the bloom in his palm, brows furrowed. He asks, “Did you pick this out of Bobby’s window boxes?”
“No,” Dean says, “Maybe…yes. Yes, I did.”

“He’s going to mount your head on his wall when he sees you doing that again,” Castiel says, “Remember what happened last time?” The consequences of the last flower-picking ended with Dean mowing the entire trailer park’s lawns for a whole month, a task that Dean did not like. Sam and Castiel, meanwhile, found it hilarious, and had sat outside with plastic cups of Mama’s Kool-Aid to watch the hilarity unfold.

A pained expression sits on Dean’s face, something in between how a person might look if they stepped on a Lego piece and vomited at the same time. It is not a pretty expression.

Castiel sighs and says, “It’s very nice, Dean. Why are you giving it to me?”

“Because I’m sorry,” he says, “I – that didn’t happen the way I wanted it to. Look, I – I’ve been pretty fucked up over this for a while, okay? And I made it sound like I just wanted to screw a dude and that’s totally not what I meant but it came out that way anyway because I’m an idiot and because,” – he takes a deep breath – “because I wasn’t thinking with my head on straight.”

“No, I would say your head was on pretty damn gay on Friday,” Castiel mutters.

A surprised peal of laughter escapes Dean’s lungs and he runs a hand through his hair.

“Yeah,” Dean says, “U-Um, but my point. Yeah, my point. The point is that it has nothing to do with the fact that you and I have the same equipment.”

“You can be a man without a penis, Dean. You attend GSA. You know that.”

“Yeah, no, I know that. I mean. Shit. This is coming out all wrong again,” Dean anxiously grabs at the back of his neck and coughs into his cupped hands before he goes on, “The point I’m trying to make here, Cas, is that I want you. Okay? And I don’t know how to handle that. I have dreams about you, for shit’s sake. I’ve gotten off just thinking about you friggin’ smiling at me and it’s not ‘cause you’re a dude it’s ‘cause – it’s ‘cause you’re you.”

“Dean, this is not a funny joke,” Castiel carefully spells out, “In fact, I’m finding this the opposite of funny and I would like to be taken home now.”

“I’m not joking!” Dean snaps, and slams his fists down on the Impala’s steering wheel, “I think about you all the time. At first I thought it was just that we were made to be best friends, you know? But then I started dreaming about you and waking up hard, started thinking about how fucking much I wanted to do this,” Dean leans over the gearshift and pushes his fingers back through Castiel’s hair. He’s close enough that his breath is hot against the skin of Castiel’s neck, and the smell of him again begins overwhelm. His voice is softer when he continues, “Thought about doing so much.”

Dean’s lips hover over Castiel’s jaw, ghosting over the skin. One of Dean’s hands makes its way forward and into Castiel’s lap, but instead of going for his crotch like he did on Friday, he covers Castiel’s hand in his and squeezes.

Then he kisses him, but it’s nothing like the kiss that they shared after the Rocky Horror Picture Show performance. This kiss is gentle and hesitant, like Dean is afraid that Castiel might break. It’s also intensely satisfying – the way Dean runs his tongue over Castiel’s lower lip, the way his grip in Castiel’s hair tightens, how he closes his eyes and probes Castiel’s mouth with his tongue like he wants to discover each and every corner of it. Like peeling the skin of a clementine off in a perfect spiral, like a glass of cool water at the end of a hot summer day, like pulling the top layer off of sunburned shoulders, this kiss is gratification at its finest.
When they break apart, Dean looks just as shell-shocked as Castiel feels.

“Oh man,” Dean murmurs.

Castiel swallows and says, “I have…no idea what we’re doing.”

“Neither do I, but I know I like it,” Dean says. He unbuckles his seatbelt and climbs over into the backseat. He gestures for Castiel to follow, and even though Castiel’s better judgment tells him not to, he does, unbuckling and climbing back. He sits beside Dean, heart beating wildly.

“So,” Dean starts, and red colors his cheeks, “All right, so if you ask me, the best way to get a sorry is a blow job. But uh. I’ve never tried that before. And I am probably bad at it. But I wanna try it real bad.”

Castiel makes a face and asks, “You – you want to suck me off?”

“Kinda…really bad, yeah,” Dean says, and offers a shaky smile.

“Dean,” Castiel says.

“That a no?”

“No, it’s not a – okay, you know that everything is going to change if you do this, right?” Castiel asks, “You can’t un-suck your best friend’s dick.”

“Cas, pretty sure if we didn’t want anything to change that you should’ve given me that speech before that kiss,” Dean says, “Please?”

“I don’t want to be jerked around,” Castiel says softly.

“I’m not jerking you around,” Dean insists, “and I know I fucked up right off the bat but, okay. Let me explain.” He pushes Cas down, urging him onto his back on the seat. Castiel lets him, though his eyes shutter closed when Dean climbs on top of him and straddles his lap. He feels Dean’s lips brush along the edge of his jaw, moving up to his cheeks, his eyelids, his forehead. He says, “When Lisa dumped me, she said that she couldn’t be with somebody that wanted his best friend. That wanted you. And it got me thinkin’, you know, and she was right, but God, I was messed up over it. I’d just never – anyway, I watched a lot of gay porn and that was pretty good but it wasn’t you and then you were there in front of me in panties and fuckin’ thigh highs and I just…messed up.”

Castiel opens his eyes and smirks up at Dean. He says, “Dean Winchester, do you have a panty kink?”

“Maybe,” Dean murmurs.

Dean scoots back and pops open the fly of Castiel’s jeans. Dean pulls the jeans down just barely. He stares at first, and then lays his hand over Cas’ cock, rubbing gingerly. The touch is much more careful than the way that he grabbed Cas on Friday, much more exploratory.

Dean catches his lower lip between his teeth and looks back up at Cas through his lashes. He asks, “S’t good?”

Castiel squirms a little and nods, “Really good, Dean.”

The interior of the Impala is cold when Dean pulls down Castiel’s plaid boxers and exposes his cock. He’s hard already, flushed and pink against his belly. A crooked little smile quirks up Dean’s mouth
and he comments, “You’re kinda big, dude.”

“Thank you?” Castiel says.

“It’s a compliment,” Dean assures him, “But it does kinda make my job harder.”

Then Dean leans down and noses along the length of Castiel’s erection. His tongue darts out and licks up the shaft, breathing through his nose. A strangled sound pulls out of Castiel’s throat, and he thrusts his hips up at the friction of Dean’s mouth and tongue playing along him but only teasing. When Dean’s lips close over the head of Cas’ cock, Castiel swears. His mouth is hot and slick, but the best part is watching as Dean sucks the length inside him, lips pink and slick and stretched, hitch between his brow as he focuses.

He gags and pulls off with a muttered, “Shit. Sorry. I knew I was gonna suck at this.”

“You’re sucking something, that’s for sure,” Castiel says.

Dean makes a face and says, “Goddamnit. You know what? Just for that, I’m gonna do this.”

He takes Cas’ erection into his mouth again and hollows out his cheeks. He sucks and tongues, even though he can’t get it all inside. Dean uses a combination of his mouth and his hands, and with the heated sensation of that mouth and the tightness, a familiar pressure builds in Cas’ gut. He groans and sighs, hands sliding up along the seat and grabbing at air. When his fingers can’t find an anchor, he settles on gripping Dean’s hair. The pressure makes Dean moan around Cas’ cock, and Cas pulls up harder at the strands.

Dean makes another noise around Castiel as he bobs his head and sucks down, a helpless whine.

Then Cas breaks open and comes with a loud, “Holy fuck, Dean!”

Dean chokes a little as he pulls off, and come spills out over his lips and chin. He swallows most of it, pulling up the collar of his t-shirt to wipe up the excess. His nose wrinkles and he says, “Tastes funny.”

“Bad?”

“Not bad,” Dean says, and scoots up to settle his body on top on Castiel’s, thrusting his fingers back through Cas’ hair to pull his head up. Their lips meet and Cas can taste his come on Dean’s tongue, bitter and perfect all at once. Dean smiles when they split and says, “Just kinda funny. I like it.”

Castiel can’t help but smile back at that, and says, “Maybe I’ll like how you taste, too.”

Dean’s little smile grows into a full-fledged grin and he agrees, “Maybe.”

He kisses Castiel again, and while their tongues touch Cas loops his arms around Dean’s neck. He feels so good against him, even better than Cas fantasized about. When Dean moans into Castiel’s mouth and rolls his hips up against him, he realizes Dean is hard too, trapped in his jeans.

Castiel’s breath hitches. He clears his throat and says, “Hey, Dean?”

“Mmmmm?”

“Apology accepted.”
Also PS my SPN tumblr is scarletofletters.tumblr. Sometimes I liveblog fanfic woes.
A Beautiful Oblivion

Chapter Notes

Happy Thanksgiving y'all!

Have an entire chapter of porn (and okay, maybe some feelings in there too).

Chapter Track: Inside Out – Eve 6

A Beautiful Oblivion

Neither of them wants to return to the trailer park right away, so instead they trade kisses in the backseat of the Impala, lazy and languid against each other’s mouths and throats. Dean seems determined to discover every last section of Castiel’s skin. He noses along Cas’ dark hair and runs chapped lips over his forehead, down to his eyelids and the crests of his cheekbones.

“Goddamn, Cas,” Dean murmurs against his neck, where sweat still beads just under the collar of his t-shirt.

Against his leg, Dean shifts to kiss his lips again. The weight of Dean’s erection presses into his side and reminds him that he hasn’t given back for what he received. Cas presses his lips to the space between Dean’s brows and sits up.

“What’re you doin’?” Dean asks, voice rough and brow crinkling. He licks his dry lips and watches Castiel with careful eyes, and Cas realizes, belatedly, that Dean is afraid that this will end and Castiel will be upset with him again.

Castiel reaches up to smooth Dean’s creased brow with the pad of his thumb and says, “Relax. I’m just going to reciprocate.”

Dean frowns and says, “Hey, but – not that I don’t want that…um, like, super bad – but this whole thing was supposed to be about you, not me.”

“Dean,” Castiel says, and levels a glare, “Shut up and let me suck your dick.”

Dean laughs and flushes a little more. He places his hand on Cas’ upper arm, but then slides his touch up to cup his palm against his cheek. He strokes his thumb over Castiel’s cheek and smirks – an old, familiar smirk that ignites old warmth low in Castiel’s belly – before asking, “How’s a guy supposed to say no to that?”

Like Dean did for him, Castiel eases him back onto the Impala’s backseat, laying him out flat and crawling up into his lap to kiss and lick into his mouth. He grinds down against Dean’s cock where it strains against denim and Dean lets out a low, pained noise. He throws his head back against leather. When Dean squeezes his eyes closed and says, “Cas, please,” he can’t find it in him to deny Dean, and saves the teasing for a later date.

Cas smooths his hands over the front of Dean’s jeans and trains his eyes on Dean’s face as he undoes the fly and works them down far enough to reveal the Batman symbol, tented up by his erection. The sight makes Cas snort and surge up to kiss Dean again. He laughs softly, “Why am I not surprised?”
“Hey, you’re not even a little surprised that I’m Batman?” Dean huffs out.

Castiel rolls his eyes and mutters, “Stripper Batman, maybe.”

Dean whacks his arm and says, “Oh, fuck you.”

With steadier hands than he expected to have, Castiel peels down the Batman boxer briefs. Dean’s hard cock is one of the loveliest things that he’s ever seen – thick and red and leaking a bead of precome at the tip. He’s thicker than Castiel is, though similar in length. He is cut where Castiel is not and the sight of it all has him dazed. He reaches down to touch his fingertips to the hot, soft skin. Dean’s breath catches in his throat, and he moans out, “Damn. Shit. You should touch me more. Please.”

Cas can’t help but smile at this, and closes his fist around Dean’s erection, giving him a couple of sure strokes before he strokes further down between his legs, cupping his balls while he leans in for another kiss.

A shudder wracks Dean’s body. He makes noises that neither Crowley nor Balthazar ever did, inhuman noises, responding to each touch like he’s never felt anything like it before. Castiel kisses his way down from Dean’s throat, mouthing over the well-worn cotton of his t-shirt. He pulls Dean’s shirt up to apply his lips to the skin underneath. He moves his tongue along little brown freckles that dot Dean’s abdomen like constellations. The smell of him is strong here against his stomach, the scent of that perfect blend of skin, sweat and clean. Castiel goes dizzy just by inhaling it.

Nervously, he lifts his eyes to Dean, whose heated expression prompts him to say, “You’re…really beautiful.”

A look of confusion crosses Dean’s face and he echoes, “Beautiful?”

Cas nods, “All of you – you’re just – sorry, I…wanted you so much and it just – seemed like the right word.”

Dean smiles a little, corners of his eyes crinkling.

“You too,” he says.

Castiel pushes another kiss to Dean’s abdomen before he tips his head to take the head of Dean’s cock into his mouth. He sweeps precome into his mouth and sighs against the erection. Dean makes a strained noise deep in his throat and presses his hips up a little more, rubbing up against Cas like he’s in heat. Cas obliges to the silent demand and pulls a little more of Dean into his mouth, one slow, hot inch at a time.

Weeks and months of practice with Crowley has made Castiel at least proficient at blow jobs. He fell out of practice between Crowley and Balthazar but has gotten back into the swing of it since, being able to work past his gag reflex to take as much of Dean in as he can. He uses his tongue and hums gently. Dean’s hands pull up at Castiel’s hair and the pain keeps him in the present. The smell of Dean helps him relax more. It isn’t the same as the sharp, expensive scent of Crowley, or Balthazar’s vague spiciness. The aroma of Dean is plain and practical, familiar, a smell that reminds Castiel of home.

“Cas,” Dean gasps out. His hips lift and press closer to him at a quicker and quicker pace as he babbles, “Shit, your mouth. Feels so good. You feel so good, baby.”

At the word *baby* Castiel can’t help but groan a little, though the sound is stifled by the cock in his mouth. The movements of Dean’s body become erratic and Castiel can only hold still and let him
take the control. Dean fists his hands in Castiel’s hair and thrusts up. He warns on a whine, “Gonna come, Cas,” and does so. Castiel exhales through his nostrils and swallows. Unlike Dean, he can manage the task neatly, and draws back with chin clean.

“Dude,” Dean pants. His body is relaxed completely, melted back against the seat with limbs like rubber. His hands slip from Castiel’s hair and he wipes the sweat shining on his forehead. He breathes, “Holy crap. Where did you learn to do that?”

“I’ve been with other guys before,” Castiel shrugs, “You know that.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean murmurs, “Sorry I was kinda rough. You okay?”

Castiel sits up and says, “My jaw’s sore, but I’m good,” and he sits up straighter, “You called me baby.”

Dean huffs, “Yeah, I did. That okay?”

“I liked it,” Castiel admits, “Nobody’s ever called me anything like that before.”

“Really?” Dean says. He slides up and tucks his soft cock back into his Batman briefs, “But you were with that Crowley guy for a while.”

“I wasn’t with him,” Cas says, “It was sex.”

“Oh,” Dean says, “So you never went out or anything?”

Cas shakes his head, “No. It wasn’t like that.”

Dean is quiet for a little after this. He zips his jeans back up and reaches over to Cas’ lap, where he’s still in disarray with his dick out of his pants. It’s almost tender – the way that Dean arranges Cas back in order. He pulls Cas’ boxers back up and buttons the top of his jeans. A look of concentration clouds his face, and when he looks back up, his brow is crinkled again.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel asks.

“Does this make us a thing?” Dean asks.

“A thing?”

“Yeah, a thing.”

Castiel frowns. He wants to say that sucking each other off when you’re best friends already should probably indicate an intimate relationship, but he doesn’t say those words. Instead, he answers carefully, “I suppose if that’s something you want…”

“No, idiot, I’m asking what you want,” Dean says, “I just – you never tell me what you want. So tell me.”

He does not like being asked what he wants. Wanting things is dangerous, and Dean knows that lesson just as well as Castiel does. But after everything that’s happened, what does he have left to lose? He and Dean already can’t revert back to being the same kind of friends as they were before.

So Castiel swallows his fear, though he doesn’t look Dean in the eye as he says, “I think I would like being a thing very much.”

“Good,” Dean says, and uses his palm to tip Castiel’s head back up so their eyes meet again, “Me
too.” He pulls Cas into a kiss. They taste like each other. It’s dirty and lovely at the same time, and Castiel falls into it so easily. He lets Dean wrap his arms around him and heave them close against each other once more, chest to chest as they kiss and feel their way around one another. Since their orgasms the frantic need slips away, replaced by the urge to explore, to feel.

And then Castiel’s phone vibrates against his thigh. He jumps back and extracts it from his pocket to see ‘Mama’ flash across the screen, and answers an instant later with, “Hey, Mama.”

“How, where are you?” she demands, “It’s getting dark and I got no word from you and none of your brothers or sisters know where you are. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Cas reassures her, “I’m with Dean.”

That gives Missouri pause. She asks, “Is everything all right between you two?”

Castiel looks over at Dean and smiles. He says, “Yes, we’re all right. I’ll come home now. Could Dean stay over for supper?”

“Sure, sugar,” Missouri replies, “I’m glad to hear you two boys got everything sorted out. I’ll see you both soon.”

Castiel bids Mama goodbye and slips his phone back into the pocket of his jeans before he says, “We should probably get back.”

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, and leans in for a chaste kiss, pecking Castiel’s lips before he maneuvers back into the front seat of the Impala. When Castiel follows and settles in on seat beside him, the leather is cold and he misses the warmth of Dean already. When he shivers, Dean sheds his leather coat and passes it to him.

Castiel blushes but takes it – Dean is a little broader in the shoulder than he is, but it basically fits, and inside it’s hot and smells like everything Dean does. He tries not to let Dean see him snuggle into it, but Dean catches him anyway, and says, “You like it?”

Cas nods.

“That’s my favorite, but I can always give you one of my hoodies,” he offers.

“You’d do that?” Cas asks.

“Well, we’re a thing, aren’t we?” queries Dean, “We could trade hoodies or somethin’.”

“Really?” Cas doesn’t mean to squawk, but that’s what happens anyway.

At a red light, Dean looks over at him with a deep frown. He says, “Dude – baby, you gotta trust me. I thought, I just…I want this, okay? I won’t fuck you over.”

And he doesn’t want to be scared, but he can’t help it. He says lowly, “I’ve been fucked over pretty much my entire life, Dean. It might take some time before I can get over that. But…” – he sighs – “I’ll try.” He will. If Dean gives him a hoodie that smells like him that he can sleep in, maybe that will help the chaos churning inside him settle.

Grand gestures have smoothed his feathers before, like Christmastime with Missouri and his foster siblings, or his fifteenth birthday party, but those have never been the things that broke into him. It was the little things that chipped away at the wall he’d built up – playing video games with Charlie, Missouri adding an extra snack in his lunch bag, drinking cocoa and playing cards on the floor of his
bedroom with his foster brothers – those things made the change, and so subtly that he didn’t even realize his defenses were down until the incident after Rocky Horror.

Dean hums something that sounds like a concession, and that holds them both over until they arrive back at Sugar Lane. Dean parks the Impala outside the Winchester trailer, checks for Sam (he is not home) and brings out a dark blue hooded sweatshirt for Castiel to keep before they walk back to Mama’s. Dean slings his arm around Cas’ shoulders, but this isn’t like other times he’s done it. He leans over and kisses his cheek right after, all tentativeness and hesitation.

The inside of Missouri’s home smells like potatoes frying and a mélange of spices. It makes Cas’ stomach growl and a pleased smile light up Dean’s face, though the smile only lasts until Gabriel ducks out of the kitchen, sees them arm in arm, and shouts, “Finally!”

“What’s that?” Missouri’s voice drifts out from behind Gabe, and she appears with a greasy spatula in her clutch. When her gaze settles on Dean and Castiel, she shakes her head and says, “Well, sugar, it’s about damn time. What did I tell you? C’mere, the both of you.”

They do, and Mama brings them each in for a hug with either arm. When she releases them she points her spatula at Dean and says, “You. You hurt that boy and you will see the end of my shotgun, you hear me?”

“Yes, Mama,” Dean obediently replies, at the same time as Castiel says, “You have a shotgun?”

“You better believe I got a shotgun,” Mama says, “How else would I scare folks off from hurting my babies?” Her spatula moves to Castiel, “And you. You hurt my Dean and you will also see my shotgun. Now why don’t you boys set the table for supper, hm?”

They scurry to follow orders, ducking around Gabriel and Missouri as they prepare the food for the night, pork chops, green beans, potatoes fried in butter and spices, and –

“Is that pie?” Dean asks hopefully. Two plates of pie sit cooling on the window sill above the sink, one apple pie, and one pecan, both of which smell sweet and divine.

“Sure is,” Gabriel answers.

With supper on schedule, the rest of the kids drift in. They have to pull up a spare chair for Dean to sit in before they dig into the feast. Anna gives Castiel a small smile at the sight of his and Dean’s hands linked together on the tabletop.

Hester asks with a green bean in her mouth, “Are you Castiel’s boyfriend now?”

Dean smiles and says, “You bet I am,” and winks, as though he hasn’t confirmed something invaluable to Castiel.

Dean eats as much as a horse and somehow still manages room for pie. To his woe, he isn’t allowed to have a slice of each, so he selects apple and dispenses a healthy scoop of vanilla ice cream to accompany it. He laughs and talks with Missouri and Gabe and the rest of the kids, all the while giving Cas soft smiles that feel like secrets and brushing his fingers against Cas’ thigh or through his hair. Each little touch and bark of laughter makes Castiel feel fuller, and knits the pieces of him that broke apart on Friday back together.

At the end of the night, Dean kisses Cas on the stoop of the boys’ mobile home and promises to text him later. Castiel watches him cross the park, whistling with his hands tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket. There’s a bounce to his step, a bounce that Castiel always previously associated with old girlfriends and Dean getting lucky.
It isn’t until after Castiel has washed off his eyeliner, brushed his teeth, and climbed into his bed with Dean’s hoodie bundled around him that he realizes the skip in Dean’s step is all because of him.

X

Dean likes to try things.

This is a truth Castiel discovers only a few hours after enduring the embarrassment that is the doctor’s appointment he’s dragged to by Missouri. She says that he needs to make sure that he’s clean and that Dean does, too, and so he’s cajoled into relating his sexual history in front of his foster mother to gangly Dr. Fitzgerald, whom insists upon being called Garth. For once in his life he’s thankful he has little to speak to.

Once the appointment ends and Castiel returns to the park, however, Dean pulls up front in the Impala and takes Castiel on his very first date.

“You’re not wearing eyeliner,” Dean observes when he climbs into the car.

“Yes, I…thought I looked better this way today,” Castiel shrugs, “Do you want me to wear eyeliner?”

Dean shakes his head and says, “Nah, you do whatever you want, man. Anyway, I figured a traditional dinner and a movie would suck nuts ‘cause it’s not like we need to get to know each other. You wanna grab some burgers and hit the arcade?”

That’s exactly what they do, and it’s divine. Dean drives them to a dive diner near the KU campus, where they enjoy some of the best burgers that Castiel has ever had the pleasure of partaking of, and finish up with heated pies with ice cream on the side.

At the arcade, Dean uses a twenty to convert into a pile of quarters and they go to town, hitting Galaga, which Dean is much better at that Castiel. Castiel makes up for his losses by winning a prize at one of the pinball machines and kicking Dean’s ass at skeeball. The night consists mostly of alternating between shit-talking each other and cheering the other on while they battle arcade games for high scores. Overall, Dean is more skilled at the games, but Castiel knows he and Sam come and play games at the arcade all the time – he has more experience under his belt.

When the arcade’s closing time comes, neither of them wants to part with the other, but Castiel figures that it had to happen eventually. It’s another memory so happy that he tucks it neatly away in the back of his mind to keep forever. He even says when he buckles himself into the Impala, “Thank you for tonight. I had so much fun.”

Dean looks over with a devilish smile and says, “Night’s not over yet, Cas.”

They drive in the opposite direction of Sugar Lane and drive for some time, until they’re a little way out of town. Dean parks at the side of a quiet, unlit road, and it’s only then that Castiel finally asks, “What are we doing?”

“Wanted some time alone with you,” Dean says, “And you’ve gotta check this out.”

Dean swings around to the trunk and opens it up, tucking a blanket under his arm. He nods toward the side of the road, where a hill crests up, choked with weeds and wild plants low to the ground. A narrow path worn by many pairs of feet splits the hill in half. They follow it all the way to the top, and when they finally stop, Castiel has to take his asthma medication because of the exertion.

But Castiel does see why Dean wanted to bring him here.
Up on this hill, they can see the whole city, lights twinkling under them like stars on the ground.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Dean says.

Castiel shoots him a wry look and asks, “How many girls have you taken here, exactly?”

“None,” he says.

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious,” Dean replies, “I found this place a few years ago when I got real mad at my dad. We got into a dumb fight and I jacked the Impala and stopped it when I started to get outta Lawrence. I saw the footpath, so I took it – and I found this. Used to come up here to smoke weed by myself sometimes, other times get drunk. And after the whole Rocky Horror thing I slept up here.”

“Weren’t you cold?” asks Cas, incredulous.

“I was okay,” shrugs Dean, “I brought a sleeping bag. Anyway, it’s a nice night and I thought I’d share.”

Cas pounces at Dean and kisses him. It all feels too good to be true, but he closes his eyes and lets himself believe every word as Dean strokes his tongue over the ridges of his mouth. The kiss goes from sweet to heated in instants. Dean drops the blanket into the grass and his hands lower to cup Cas’ ass. He heaves him up, even though Castiel is barely smaller than him, and sighs into his mouth.

Dean lets him go with a peck to his cheek and reaches for the blanket. He fans it out across the ground and sits down, patting the space beside him. Castiel follows and Dean kisses him again, lips and tongue and teeth and all the good things. Dean manhandles him back and Castiel falls against the ground with an oof.

“Sorry,” Dean chuckles, and pulls back just enough to tug his leather jacket off of his shoulders. He bundles it up and sticks it under Cas’ head with a soft, “That better?”

“Mm,” Cas says, “Only if you kiss me again.”

“Can do,” grins Dean, and he shifts back down. His weight presses Castiel into the ground, and it should be uncomfortable but instead it’s perfect. Dean’s warmth surrounds him as his arms come to rest around his head, making a halo as Dean runs his lips along the blade of Castiel’s jaw and comes to press their tongues together.

Of their own accord, Cas’ hips lift up to grind up against Dean, to get closer to him, feel him everywhere.

“You’re hard,” Dean says against Cas’ mouth.

His face heats and he replies, “Yes. Sorry?”

“Don’t be sorry, baby,” Dean says. He peppers kisses over Castiel’s face and reaches down, pressing his palm against the tent in Castiel’s jeans. He smiles, “Want you to feel good. What do you want? I could suck you off, or —”

“I want you naked,” Castiel says, “May I have that?”

Dean rears up and pulls his shirt over his head, setting it aside at the edge of their blanket. His chest is broad and pale gold, little brown freckles between stretches of ink. The tattoo that matches
Castiel’s sits proudly over Dean’s heart, and Zeppelin the crow watches over the low-slung waist of Dean’s ragged jeans. Dean peels the denim down over his legs and casts the pants aside, underwear quick to follow. He’s half-hard already between his legs.

“This is new,” Cas murmurs, and strokes the tips of his fingers over black ink and pink skin on Dean’s right calf. A sword gleams on the skin, tattoo so new that the area is still hairless. In the hilt, red rubies twinkle back at Castiel. It looks real.

“Yeah,” Dean smiles, “You like it?”

“It’s beautiful,” Castiel replies. Nervousness squeezes at his gut. What he really wants from Dean is to feel Dean inside him, to be closer to him than they’ve ever been before. But considering everything that’s happened, he doesn’t know how ready Dean would be for that. Still, he pulls off Dean’s blue hoodie and his t-shirt in one movement. He’s tanner than Dean just by a little, and has only one freckle on his chest, right against his right nipple.

Castiel sheds what remains of his clothing and gnaws on his lower lip, faltering.

“Christ,” Dean murmurs, “You’re somethin’ else.”

“Um, Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“What – I mean, how much would you be willing to try?” Castiel asks.

“Anything,” Dean says, “Honest. I wanna try everything with you. Here.” He draws back and grabs for his jeans, and then dumps out the contents of the pockets: a string of three condoms and a bottle of lube, open but barely used.

Castiel chuckles and says, “You were certainly optimistic.”

“Yeah, I try,” Dean shrugs, “I’ve, um. I’ve done butt stuff. With girls, though, not guys. And I’ve never had anyone, you know – try it on me. But, uh. I could go for that. If you wanted. I trust you.”

“Come here,” Castiel says, and opens his arms. He kisses Dean and strokes his hands through his hair. He goes on, “I want you to fuck me. Is that okay?”

And then Dean grins, and the nerves evaporate. Resounding rightness is all that remains as Castiel holds Dean in his arms and kisses him everywhere. Dean sucks bruises onto Castiel’s throat and closes his fingers around his cock, stroking clumsily. Barely-there stubble scrapes along the sensitive skin of Castiel’s throat and collarbone before Dean lowers his mouth to Castiel’s nipple, closing over the areola and gently sucking. Cas gasps and holds Dean’s head against him, tangling fingers in his hair and clutching at him. Dean scrapes his teeth over the skin and huffs soft breaths.

Castiel squirms and says, “More, please.”

Dean pauses his ministrations to laugh against Cas’ breastbone. He says, “That’s the politest fuckin’ request I have ever heard from a dude that’s about to get fucked.”

“More, you asshole,” Castiel corrects, and Dean laughs harder.

Dean retrieves the bottle of lube. The pop of the cap opening seems to echo, and Castiel squirms. His heart pumps blood throughout his body hard and fast as he watches Dean coat his fingers. Castiel closes his eyes and expects the touch of slick against his hole – but when nothing comes, he opens
his eyes again and sees Dean staring at him.

“Did you change your mind?” asks Cas, “It’s okay if you did.”

“No, dude,” Dean says, a boyish smile tilting his face, “No. Baby. I just. You look real nice, is all. I was savoring the moment.”

Dean spreads Castiel’s legs and kisses him, a diversion from the touch of wet fingers touching against his entrance. He slides one inside and probes, licking into Castiel’s mouth as he moans and wriggles against the touch, demanding more. He pants, “I can take more than a finger, Dean.”

“I know you can, baby,” he says, “I just wanna enjoy this.”

So he lets Dean probe him, gentle and careful in his exploration. When the tip of his finger bumps up against Castiel prostate, he throws his head back and moans. He holds his fist against his mouth to keep quiet and fails miserably, especially as Dean hits the spot against and stares at him through lust-blown eyes.

“Please,” Cas begs, “Please give me more. Need more of your fingers. Please.”

“Shh,” Dean hushes, and kisses Cas quiet as a second thick digit breaches him. The stretch is good, everything that Castiel wants. He moves his hips up against the touch and Dean’s lips vanish from his. Dean mutters, “Fuck, that is hot. Holy shit.”

Castiel milks the moment for all it’s worth and fucks back against Dean’s hand, holding himself up on his elbows to leverage his body into the best position to take it. He tosses his head back and breathes hard, trying to keep his wits and failing miserably. He wants more, wants to be fucked, wants to feel Dean inside him. This moment is the star of every shower-masturbation fantasy that Castiel has ever indulged in: Dean sweating and focused above him, turned on with his erection thick and heavy, looking like he’s only barely in control of himself.

Three fingers work Castiel open now, the stretch accompanied with a familiar burn. He bucks against Dean’s hand and moans and whimpers, making any noise that might get Dean to hurry up and slide inside him.

“Cas,” Dean says, and that’s it. He can’t take any more. He slides away from Dean’s hand and pushes him onto his back on the blanket. He gropes for the condoms and rips one off. He rolls it over Dean’s cock and pours lube over him, stroking it for an even coat and reaching back to use the excess to add more slick to himself.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Dean keens when Castiel crawls on top of him. He grips Dean’s erection and holds it firm as he eases back. The blunt head of his cock feels incredible as it stretches Castiel open.

Inch by inch, he sinks down until he’s seated on Dean to the hilt.

“Holy fuck,” Dean gasps. At first he claws at the blanket underneath them, but when Castiel starts rocking back onto his dick, both Dean’s hands come to rest at his waist, fingers biting into Castiel’s flesh. He pushes Castiel back down and pulls him up again, taking the control. He babbles, “Baby, you look so good, so good on my cock. God, yeah, fuck me just like that.”

Castiel rides him hard and watches Dean’s face throughout. His heart clenches when Dean smiles through a groan and asks for more, asks for Cas to fuck himself back on his cock harder. They’re sweating and too hot in their skin.

And then Dean surges up into a sitting position and kisses him, hard. His arms are strong, grip tight
as he shifts them both. He presses Castiel down onto his back and places a large hand on either side of his head as he begins to roll back into Cas’ body in thorough, slow thrusts. Castiel wraps his legs around Dean’s waist and holds him close to his body. He never thought that it could be like this – sex with Crowley and Balthazar had been so clinical, but this is different. Dean kisses his face and strokes his hair and murmurs dirty things against his ear. Each press of his body is hard but vigilant. He’s attentive and he looks Cas in the eye with each push and pull of their sticky bodies.

“I’m getting close,” Dean whispers, “You feel so fuckin’ good. Love the way you look right now, Cas. Love you all fucked-out and pretty and just for me.”

“Just for you,” Cas agrees.

A shudder bursts through Dean’s body, and he spears Cas one final time before curling into him and coming. He presses languid kisses all along Castiel’s skin and mutters, “God, Cas, you’re amazing,” before he pulls out. Castiel whines at the empty, cold feeling that Dean leaves behind, but only a moment later his cock is swallowed by the heat of Dean’s mouth. He isn’t as clumsy as he was the first time, though the technique could certainly use some more work. It doesn’t take Castiel long to climax after such a wonderful ride, and this time Dean catches it all in his mouth and swallows it down.

Dean collapses on Castiel’s side and kisses him again. He wraps his arms around Castiel and holds him close. No one’s ever done that after sex before – the holding thing.

“Fuck, Cas,” Dean says, and noses the bruised skin of Castiel’s neck.

Timidly, Castiel applies another kiss to Dean’s lips and asks, “Was that okay?”

“Okay? Dude, that was awesome,” Dean grins and another rain of kisses starts on Cas’ face.

“Dean,” he whines, and then starts laughing when Dean won’t stop. Dean clutches Cas against him and puts his lips to every space of skin that he can reach. When he breaks to breathe, he smooths a hand through Castiel’s hair and a genuine smile plays at his lips.

“It’s cold,” Cas remarks, “Maybe we should go back.”

Dean makes a noise of disapproval and says, “Not yet. Wanna hold you for a while.”

“Dean Winchester, are you a cuddler?” Castiel laughs into Dean’s collarbone.

Dean rolls his eyes and mutters, “Shut up,” and then more quietly, “Feel real nice like this, baby.”

“I like when you call me baby,” Cas says, and he settles closer against Dean, feeling sated and whole.
Sure Know How to Run Things

Chapter Track: Team – Lorde

Sure Know How to Run Things

Fireball whiskey tastes like heaven.

Or so Castiel discovers when he, Dean and Sam take a bottle of the junk that Dean attained from Benny down to the creek. At first only Dean and Castiel trade sips, until Sam insists that having turned thirteen last month, and Dean relents and lets him try it. He likes it more than beer, he announces.

Dean has his arm around Castiel and puts his cinnamon-whiskey lips against his forehead. Sam makes a gagging noise but it’s good-natured, and he laughs when Dean flips him off. Sam cheered more loudly than anybody when he discovered that Dean and Cas had begun dating. Mostly everyone knew about them now, expect perhaps for John Winchester and select students at Smoky Bluff.

When he can, he likes showing Dean off. Neither of them is particularly keen on public displays of affection, but leaning on one another or wrapping an arm around the other’s waist or shoulders doesn’t fall into that realm with them. He likes being close to Dean, close enough that it’s clear what they are to each other.

And these nights are some of his favorite, lazy summer evenings spent out by the creek to avoid John Winchester’s alcohol-fueled moods, partaking of their own little sips of liquor and letting the warm flood them. They talk about everything and nothing on nights like this, arguing over whether the fourth Indiana Jones movie was a worthy addition to the series or not, or trying to convince Sam to tell his best friend Ruby that he likes her as more than a best friend.

“Worked out for me,” Dean says, and Castiel smiles. He leans over and applies a kiss to Dean’s cheek.

“You guys are so nasty,” complains Sam, “and besides, it’s not the same with Ruby and me. You know everything about each other and sometimes I feel like I don’t know anything about Ruby. I mean, she likes dark chocolate and cats. And her mom is kind of scary. But that’s pretty much all I know.”

“That’s all you know about your best friend?” Dean says, and lifts a brow, “Dude, that’s just weird.”

“I know it’s weird,” Sam says, and takes the bottle of Fireball from Cas’ clutch to tip back another sip. He makes a face but swallows and goes on, “I want to fix that.”

“Then just tell her, man,” Dean says, “Worst thing that could happen is she doesn’t like you back.”

“But that would suck,” Sam says.

“Yeah, and then you, me n’ Cas could hang out and watch movies at Mama’s,” Dean says, “and eat ice cream or whatever ‘cause that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’re down.”

“You don’t do that,” Sam says, “You just drink like dad does.”

“Sam,” Castiel warns immediately. Beside him, Dean bristles. Dean would never say as much, but
Castiel knows that he’s afraid of being like his father. As much as he loves John Winchester, the man is an example of everything that the head of a household should not be, ignorant of his family’s needs and consumed by himself.

“What?” Sam demands, “Dad gets sad, he drinks. You get sad, you drink. It’s the same thing. Even you know that’s true, Cas.”

“You know what? Fuck you,” Dean snaps and stands, “Keep the whiskey, assholes.” He marches out of the marsh and back toward the trailer park, hands shoved into the pockets of his jeans.

“Dean,” Castiel says softly, and scrambles to follow.

Dean turns just to say, “Just leave me alone.”

In the wake of Dean’s departure, silence falls between Sam and Castiel. Cas assesses Sam, who’s sour-faced and staring at the creek. He picks up a stone a few inches from his right sneaker and hurls it into the water, but doesn’t speak, even as Castiel comes to sit beside him.

“That was an unkind thing to say,” Castiel hedges.

Sam glares at him, but says to the ground, “I guess. But it’s true!”

It is true. Castiel wants to tell Sam that he doesn’t need to worry, but he understands why does worry, and that complicates things. This Sam Winchester is different than the kid that Castiel met during his first summer at Sugar Lane, two entire years ago. This Sam is growing like a weed. This Sam’s voice cracks. He can no longer be written off his falsehoods and stories about why people do things. He knows when things are wrong – and he’s thirteen, so much of the world is black and white still. Nuance escapes him despite his intelligence. Because yes, Dean does drink, and he often falls back on liquor when reality overwhelms him, but he never drinks beyond his limit and he never treats people as John Winchester has when under the influence.

Castiel heaves a breath. He suggests, “You should probably tell him that you’re sorry after he cools down.”

“Probably,” Sam admits, scuffing his shoe in the dirt. He then ventures, “Hey, Cas?”

“Yes?”

“How come you never told Dean that you liked him? How come you waited for him to say it?” Sam asks.

“Because I thought he only liked girls,” Castiel says, “and because I was afraid that everything we had together as friends would fall apart if I did. Are you afraid that that’s going to happen with Ruby?”

“She likes boys,” Sam says, “I know she does. She’s kissed boys before. And she let this one guy touch her boob outside her shirt. She says it was boring. But yeah, I guess…all of my other friends are Dean’s friends. So it’s nice to have a friend that’s just mine. And I don’t want that to disappear.”

“I’m your friend,” Cas says, “Even if I’m Dean’s boyfriend you’re still my friend. I do care deeply for your brother, of course. But I like it when it’s just us two.” He leans across the clearing to pull his sketchbook into his lap and suggests, “Would you like me to draw you? You asked me to do that, once.”

“Sure,” Sam says, and a hesitant smile breaks out over his face.
Castiel sketches that smile, trying to assemble it with Sam’s kind eyes, the slope of his nose and the still-young curve to his cheeks. Sam stays still as instructed and patiently lets Castiel manhandle his face and turn it toward the light to capture the shading at its most flattering. He only just finishes the shades around the folds in the hood of Sam’s sweatshirt when his phone buzzes with a text from Missouri telling him that he’d “better get his butt back home.”

Castiel tears the sketchbook page out and says, “Here.”

“Wow,” Sam says, “It’s really good, Cas. Thanks.” The smile that lights up Sam’s face at the drawing is enough to have Castiel smiling back.

He coughs and says, “I should get back.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, “Mama’ll kill you if you’re out after curfew again.”

“I’ll see you later,” Cas says, and leans over to pull Sam into a one-armed hug. Sam hugs back, though he’s careful not to crinkle Castiel’s drawing of him. He waves to Cas as he walks back out of the marsh and away from the creek, toward home.

X

When Castiel returns home, he changes into pajamas and tries to sleep, leaving Dean to sort himself out. Sometimes Dean needs space and sometimes Castiel needs space, and he prides himself on being able to say that they’re both good about doing that most days. But tonight he can’t sleep, and feels a lonely ache when he thinks of the twist of anger on Dean’s face when Sam accused him of being like their father.

Dean isn’t always angry when people say that he’s like John. Castiel has hovered when Dean works at the salvage yard shop, saw a different tilt to his face when he brought him a diner burger and shake to go for lunch and overheard Bobby saying Dean “had a way with his hands, just like his daddy.” John Winchester is good in the guts of an engine just like Dean is, and it’s a point of pride for both of them.

The drinking, on the other hand, makes Dean draw up like an angry animal if anyone speaks of it.

After several minutes of tossing and turning on his narrow mattress, Castiel sits up and rubs his eyes with his fists. His foster brothers are asleep in their beds – Andy and Balthazar, anyway; Gabriel’s bed is empty – and he doesn’t want to wake them. So he swings his legs over the edge of the bed and tiptoes to his shoes, pulling them over bare feet before he edges the bedroom window open and slips out of it.

He treks across the park to the Winchester trailer and climbs onto the hood of the Impala to ease open the small window into Sam and Dean’s bedroom. When he lands inside, rough hands grab him and something cold presses against his throat. Dean’s knife – the one he sleeps with under his pillow.

“Dean, it’s me,” Cas says, and is released a moment later. He stumbles over a pile of dirty laundry and turns to explain, “I just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m fine,” is the gruff response he receives.

“Okay,” Cas replies. He knows a dismissal when he hears one, “I’ll just leave, then. Text me.”

Dean grabs his arm, “No. Wait. Sorry. I didn’t mean to…don’t go.”

“Okay,” Castiel repeats, slowly.
“It’s not like you’ve got anywhere to be,” Dean says.

Castiel sighs and follows Dean as he climbs up into the top bunk. Trying to sleep in Dean’s bed together is more difficult every time that they attempt it, each of them made of sprawling limbs and filling in the skinny spaces on their bodies with muscle and fat. Dean’s thick arms come to pull Castiel closer, though, and he forgets how awkward the position is. He wraps his legs around Dean’s waist and kisses him square on the mouth. They make out like that for a while, quiet and careful not to wake Sam, until Dean presses Cas down into the mattress and pushes their hips together.

“Dean,” Cas says softly.

Dean covers Cas’ mouth with his hand and just says, “Shh.” He moves their bodies together and ruts, breathing heavily but sure to keep any noise from escaping his lips. Castiel comes first and bites his lip to keep from moaning behind Dean’s hand. Dean follows a handful of minutes later and collapses beside Castiel, kissing and licking at his neck and nosing over the bruises that he leaves. He orders Cas to stay and moments later returns with a ragged, wet hand towel. He wipes both of them up and offers Cas a fresh set of pajamas, which Castiel accepts.

They go to bed tangled together, partially out of necessity, given the limited space that Dean’s bed allows them, but mostly because when they’re this close, Castiel can feel Dean’s chest moving up and down under his arm. He can kiss the back of his neck.

And he can murmur into Dean’s ear, “Goodnight, Dean,” before they fall asleep.

X

The smell of coffee greets Castiel in the morning, as well as the sensation of cold. There’s no Dean beside him, and when he leaps down from the bunk, no Sam below, either. He pads into the kitchen, where Sam sits at the tiny kitchen table behind a cereal box and Dean stands at their cheap coffee maker. His work jumpsuit is already on, sleeves tied together at his waist below a worn muscle shirt.

When he turns and sees Cas he lowers the mug of black coffee at his lips and says, “Hey. You want some joe? How’d you sleep?”

“Hopefully you both slept better than I did,” Sam grouches from over his cereal bowl, “Since you assholes decided it would be a good idea to fuck each other like, four feet over my face.”

Castiel glances over to Dean, who lets out a full belly-laugh and says, “Oops. Sorry about that, Sammy. Didn’t know you were up.”

“I wasn’t,” says Sam, “until the entire bed frame started rocking.”

“Sorry,” Castiel says.

“Don’t be,” Sam replies lightly, “We all know whose idea that was.”

Dean hoots out another laugh before he reaches up in the kitchen cabinet to pull down another mug. He fills it for Castiel and spoons in sugar for him just the way he likes it before he passes it off with a long, showy kiss to the lips – probably because he thinks it will irritate Sam.

The sound of a clearing throat sends Castiel reeling backward.

In the opening to the kitchen stands John, deep bags ringing the undersides of his bloodshot eyes. Castiel sends a panicked look back at Dean and then glances back to John. John just rolls his eyes and says, “You three quit lookin’ at me like you’ve been caught with your hands in the cookie jar,”
and points at Cas, ‘You n’ my son are an item, hm?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Castiel answers, unsure of how to proceed. If Dean’s stories about John are any indication, there is no way that this incident can end well, but John doesn’t look even a little angry, just as tired and rough around the edges as he’s always appeared.

‘You’re one of Missouri’s, ain’t you?’ John says, ‘I’ve seen you around here before sometimes. Dean, how long have you been with this kid?’

Dean’s voice is quieter than Castiel has ever heard it before as he replies, ‘Almost four months, sir.’

‘And you ain’t never bothered introducing me?’ John says, ‘Do Bobby and Ellen know about you two?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Dean answers. After they began dating, Bobby and Ellen were among the first that Dean insisted should know about their romantic involvement, a confession upon which Ellen forcibly invited them both to a proper meal together and lectured them on treating one another well. The food had been good, and Castiel didn’t mind Ellen’s cutting words. He knew she just meant to look out for Dean’s well-being.

‘You just didn’t bother to tell me,’ John concludes, and shuffles past them both to the coffee maker. He mutters, ‘Need more caffeine before I can deal with this shit,’ and pours himself a mug, black. He turns again, resting back against the counter, and asks, ‘Dean, you wanna explain to me why you didn’t wanna tell your old man about your own goddamned boyfriend?’

Dean casts a worried look at Castiel, and so Castiel edges forward and slips his hand into Dean’s. He gives Dean’s palm a reassuring squeeze, an action that seems to be what prompts Dean to say, ‘I didn’t exactly think you’d be all gung-ho about the relationship, sir.’

‘I’m not,’ John says, ‘Who even knows what the hell this kid did to end up with Missouri?’

‘I lit someone on fire,’ Castiel answers, ‘But to be fair, it was in defense of a stray dog. Sir.’

‘He lit someone on fire,’ John says, and takes another long drink of coffee. He crouches down to open one of the cupboards low to the floor and pulls out a half-drunk bottle of Jim Beam, pouring a generous helping into his mug before he sips at it again.

‘He sure did,’ Dean says.

‘What’s your name, kid?’ John asks.

‘Castiel,’ he answers.

‘Weird-ass name,’ John says.

‘Dad,’ Sam protests from the table.

Castiel quiets Sam with one pointed look and says, ‘My biological parents were very religious. I am named after an angel.’

‘Right,’ says John. The way that he stares at Castiel doesn’t suggest the disgust that Dean feared, but instead a general disapproval that has nothing to with Castiel’s gender identity and instead has everything to do with his character. He is not sure which one is better or worse.

‘Okay, well, I have work soon, so if we can just move this little powwow along, I was gonna walk
Cas back to Mama’s,” Dean says.

John glowers and says, “Do not speak to me like that, Dean Winchester.”

Dean looks like he wants to argue, but glances at Cas and swallows whatever debate was on his tongue back into his throat. He responds, “Sorry, sir.”

“You,” John says, and points to Castiel, “will be coming over for dinner later this week. I want to see what kind of kid is dating my son. And Dean,” John rounds on his son, “for the love of God, what are you doing having sex with some random-ass kid while your brother’s right friggin’ there? If I hear about you doing anything like that again you’re gonna get an ass-whooping so good you won’t be able to sit for a week, do you understand me?”

“Yes sir,” Dean says.

“Good,” John says, seeming appeased, “Now go walk your boy home. We’ll discuss when he’ll be over for supper when you get home from Bobby’s tonight.”

As soon as Castiel and Dean are free from the trailer, Dean exhales and says, “That was not how I was imagining that going.”

“How did you imagine it?” inquires Cas.

“I kind of expected more yelling, to be honest,” Dean says, and grabs at the back of his neck as he continues, “and maybe getting thrown out on my ass? But I guess not. I think he’s just kinda put off by the fact that you’re a little delinquent.”

“Dean,” Cas protests.

“What? You are a little delinquent,” Dean says, and tugs Castiel in for a very public kiss right in front of where Bobby is watering his flowers. He murmurs against Castiel’s lips, “But you’re my little delinquent.”

Castiel laughs softly and pulls Dean in for another kiss, which ends with Bobby shouting, “Hey, ain’t nobody around here asked for PDA before it’s even eight in the morning!” and Dean answering, “My bad, Bobby.”

Dean leaves Cas at the stoop of Mama’s home with another peck to the lips before running back to his trailer, presumably to finish his lukewarm coffee before he starts his workday. Castiel waves goodbye, and waits until Dean is out of sight to duck inside the mobile home, where Gabriel has blueberry pancakes flipping in a skillet and bacon frying in a pan.

“Good morning,” Castiel greets.

Gabriel just gives him a knowing look.

Supper at the Winchesters is set to occur three days after John uncovers their liaison. Castiel is informed that he should show at the trailer at seven and no later. He stresses throughout the day and thinks about drinking or smoking something to soothe his anxiety – but then figures that if he arrived to dinner smelling of liquor or marijuana that that would be the end of his and Dean’s relationship.

Mama, naturally, hears of the dinner date and wheedles Castiel into going to Target with her to pick out a suitable set of dress clothes for the occasion. She sits outside the dressing room and has Castiel
try on clothing for the entire afternoon before the dinner. Castiel doesn’t like what he sees on the price tags but Mama insists.

They leave with two pairs of brand new jeans, one pair of khakis, two button-downs (each a different plaid pattern) and three t-shirts. He tells Mama Missouri that all this was extravagant, and she tells him to “hush his mouth.” So, he hushes his mouth.

Castiel showers and scrubs his face clean before he dresses for supper with the Winchesters. Anna has to teach him how to iron his khakis and his dress shirt before he pulls them on, buttoning the navy and black plaid to his throat. In the mirror, the reflection that stares back at him is far too stuffed-up and formal for his liking, so he pulls the tiny stub of eyeliner out of his drawer in the bathroom, even though he hasn’t worn the stuff in months, and adds a careful layer around his lids. Better.

Gabriel still laughs when he emerges from the bathroom in his Winchester-supper finery, and snaps a picture with his phone (Castiel flips the bird at the camera, but it doesn’t make him feel much better).

“He already hates me,” Castiel says, tugging at his shirt in the mirror.

Mama Missouri has now been called to the boys’ home to inspect him, and hmphs at this assertion, replying, “John can be a real piece a’ work, but I promise you that if you’re polite that it’ll be twenty times easier to win him over.”

“I’ll try my best,” Castiel replies dryly.

“See that you do,” Missouri says, and fusses with the collar of his shirt before she pats his arm and announces, “You’re as ready as you’ll ever be. Good luck, sweetheart.”

“Thanks, Mama,” he says.

Castiel ventures into the fray and tries not to fidget with his clothing too much on the short walk over to the Winchester trailer. He does end up undoing the buttons on the sleeves of his shirt and rolls the cuffs up to his elbows, though he keeps the shirt tucked into the waistband of his khakis because he thinks Mama Missouri might actually kill him if he undid that.

When he knocks on the door at six fifty nine PM, Sam answers. He snorts at Cas’ appearance and asks, “What happened to you?”

“Mama,” Cas mutters, “Do I look that bad?”

“Don’t be a douchebag, Sammy,” Dean calls, and rounds out of the kitchen to pull Castiel into a hug. He kisses him, but chastely, because John Winchester is only a few feet behind his son and watching as this all unfolds.

“Watch your mouth, Dean,” John says, “And go comb your hair. Castiel will help me n’ Sam set the table.”

“Yes sir,” Dean says, and disappears to obey.

Castiel takes a stack of plain, white plates and places them around the kitchen table as Sam sets out glasses and John fishes for the appropriate silverware. By the time that Dean returns, the table looks neat and ready to go.

“Food’s on the counter,” John says, “Castiel, you take your plate first.”
He rushes to obey, and as he, Dean and Sam walk along the counter and serve themselves chicken breast, cheesy rice and peas, he can’t help but feel as though he’s in the military, lining up for food in a mess hall and sitting with other soldiers instead of his best friends and their father. All three of them take off-brand sodas from the fridge before they sit, while John pours himself a couple fingers of whiskey on the rocks.

For several tense minutes the only noise between the four of them is the clinking and clattering of silverware on plates as they eat. They eye each other over bites of food and punctuate each stare with sips of their drinks. It’s possibly the most tense dinner that Castiel has even been subject to, worse even than the meal that he shared with the Stevensons after they caught him kissing their son over a game of Uno.

“So, Castiel,” John says, “Sam tells me that you’re the one that did the drawing of him in the living room?” He points and Castiel turns. Sure enough, the sketch that he did of Sam a mere handful of days before sits framed and on the trailer wall, right beside an old photo of Dean as a baby, sitting in Mary Winchester’s lap. That his sketch attained such an exalted place in the trailer both flatters and terrifies him, because he knows it wasn’t John that put the sketch there.

“Yes, I did do that drawing,” Castiel says.

“It’s good,” John replies shortly.

“Thank you,” Castiel replies, and silence falls over them again.

Sam pipes up a few seconds into it, “Dean liked it so much he got a frame for it at the craft store.”

“Wish I coulda made one myself, but that’ll do for now,” Dean says, “Looks pretty nice up there.”

“Is that what you’re looking at getting into after you graduate?” asks John.

Castiel shrugs his shoulders before he realizes that this isn’t an appropriate response, and coughs, “I, um, don’t know. Sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir at the dinner table,” John says, “So you don’t know if you want to pursue…art?”

“No si-Mr. Winchester. I love drawing and painting but I don’t know if I’d want a career in art,” he says, “If I decide that I do, I may not pursue higher education for it. Many art-related jobs require only the submission of a portfolio. I’ll be starting my junior year in August, so I have a little time to decide.” He probably won’t know then, either. He was never going to have a future, and with the possibility of that now in sight, he doesn’t know what to do with it. He enjoys his history and language classes, but going after a degree in either of those fields likely only sets him up for life as a scholar, and he doesn’t know if that’s something that he wants.

Castiel hates conversations about the future. Sometimes he wishes he could be like Dean, because Dean always seems to know what he’s doing. He knew that he didn’t want to be in high school anymore and so he left, and now he’s happy as a clam working under Bobby. When he’s excited about the cars that he works on, Dean can babble on forever about it, naming terms and parts of cars that Castiel didn’t know were real. He speaks similarly of his music and his old acoustic guitar.

Castiel doesn’t know if he loves anything that much.

“Interesting,” John says, and nurses his glass of whiskey, “My sons both seem to know what they want. One of their better traits.”
“Dad,” Dean says, and levels a glare at his father.

“What, Dean? I’m just trying to get to know the boy that you’re fucking, so cut me a goddamn break,” John says, with a flourish of his glass. It is now clear that this has not been his first drink of the evening.

Castiel pushes at the peas on his plate with his fork before he says calmly, “The idea that I may go to college is still new to me, Mr. Winchester. I never gave much thought to what I might do after high school until I came to live with Mama.”

Dean’s hand comes to rest on his leg underneath the table at this admission. For whatever reason, this particular fact seems to upset Dean.

“Missouri’ll do that to you,” John says, “That woman is a force of nature.”

For some reason, the way that John says these words makes them sound like an insult. Castiel simmers at this and clenches his fists around his silverware. He stiffly says, “Mama is one of the kindest, most wonderful people that I have ever met in my life and I would thank you not to speak of her in that tone of voice.”

John stares at Castiel for a long moment. The air changes when their eyes meet and neither of them falters, thickening around them with strain so tight it’s almost tangible. It breaks only when John lifts his whiskey glass to sip at the liquor. When he sets it down again, he says, “Mouthy little shit, aren’t you?”

“Dad,” this time, Dean growls the word, like an angry wolf.

“It’s one of my better traits,” Castiel says tightly, mocking John Winchester’s words back to him.

Sam’s eyes go wide and he starts picking at the food left on the plate, clearly wanting to be left out of the battle. Dean snorts and squeezes Cas’ knee. John just gets up to pour himself more whiskey and says, “Sam, why don’t you clear the table? Dean, dessert.”

Both Winchester boys straighten their backs and hasten to obey their father’s commands. In less than sixty seconds put together, the dinner plates have vanished and in their place sit smaller, clean plates for dessert, each decked with a slice of pie. Dean edges forward with a carton of ice cream and puts a scoop on the side of his and Sam’s plates. He dodges John’s, and asks, “Cas, you want ice cream?”

He nods, and Dean adds a scoop to his, as well.

By the time that dessert has come and gone, John is on his fourth glass of whiskey since Castiel’s arrival. He commands his sons to clear the table again, and as they do, John says under his breath, just loudly enough for Castiel to hear over the water running in the kitchen while Sam rinses off the pie plates, “I swear on my wife’s grave, kid, if you fuck with my son no one will hear a goddamn word from you again. Are we clear?”

“We’re clear,” Castiel says, “As long as we’re also clear that no one will hear from you again if you hurt Dean or Sam again. I saw the bruises on Dean’s back. He said he got them at work, but we both know better than that, don’t we?”

John goes dead quiet. Castiel is certain that he’s written his own name on John’s shit list for life, until John throws his head back and lets out a loud, whiskey-scented laugh. He drinks the remains of glass number four and slams it down on the small table before announcing, “You’re all right, kid. I don’t like you, but you’re all right.”

“I don’t like you either,” Castiel says, and smiles.
In the end, John has had enough to drink that it takes both Sam and Dean to get him into bed and what sounds like a muttered argument before John is safely put away and Dean is free again. He looks furious when he emerges from John’s bedroom. Immediately, Dean grabs for the keys to the Impala that sit on a hook near the front door.

“Sammy, Cas and me are going out, okay? I’ll be back later,” he gruffly says.

“Okay,” Sam says, but frowns, “Don’t stay out all night. I don’t wanna deal with dad alone when he wakes up.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean agrees, and grabs Cas by the arm, physically pulling him out of the trailer.

Castiel only asks where they’re going when he’s buckled in and they’re turning out of Sugar Lane. Dean blows all the air out of his lungs before he answers, “God, sorry that was so fucking awful,” and nothing about what direction they’re headed in.

“It was okay,” Castiel says. The supper went better than he expected, though not well.

Dean pulls the car into an empty lot behind an empty brick building with a FOR LEASE sign and a phone number displayed in the front window. He tips his head behind them and they switch gears, unbuckling and lounging in the spacious backseat of the Impala. Dean pulls a plastic baggie of weed from underneath the passenger’s side seat. He watches as Dean carefully arranges some in a rolling paper and licks it, closing the joint neatly before he flicks his lighter out of the pocket of his jeans.

“C’mere,” Dean says. He breathes in smoke and holds it in his mouth. With one hand he tugs Cas forward and places their mouths together, exhaling smoke into Castiel’s lungs.

“Mm,” Castiel moans, and he takes the joint from Dean to return the favor.

As the joint dwindles down to nothing, shotgunning smoke into each other’s mouths becomes lazy making out. Cas straddles Dean’s lap, arms hooked around Dean’s neck and hands wandering in his hair as their tongues slide against one another. Dean is hard already and Cas is quick to follow, rubbing his body up and down, rolling his hips so their erections push together through the confines of their pants.

Dean’s breath starts coming harder and he moves his mouth to suck a string of love bites from the skin behind Castiel’s ear down to where his shirt sits nestled against the base of his neck. When he pulls back he’s grinning. Dean murmurs, “You look like a fuckin’ schoolboy all buttoned up like that.”

Both of them laugh, and Castiel reaches to undo the first few buttons, smoothing the shirt open before he cocks a brow and asks, “Better?”

“It’ll do,” Dean says, and leans in to kiss Castiel’s collarbone.

Castiel resumes the movement of his hips, grinding down on Dean with little gasps of pleasure and tugs up on Dean’s hair. Dean’s bites and sucking becomes more insistent, mouth moving to circle a nipple while his fingers work on the remaining buttons of Castiel’s dress shirt.

“Cas,” Dean sighs when their cocks brush in a particularly delicious way, and then more urgently, “Cas.”

“Hm?”

“Cas, I want you to fuck me.”
That gets Castiel’s attention. He pulls back from his ministrations on Dean’s jaw and asks, “What?”

“I want you to fuck me,” Dean says, and Castiel must still look clueless because he clarifies, “Fuck me. You know. Your dick. My ass. Fucking.”

“Yes, I am aware of the mechanics of intercourse, Dean,” Castiel says, “Are you certain? It hurt me the first time. Of course, I’d be more careful with you than Crowley was with –”

“I trust you,” Dean interrupts, “C’mon, don’t look at me like that. We both need a good fucking after that nightmare.”

That’s fair.

Castiel swallows the knot in his throat before he leans to apply a ginger kiss to the center of Dean’s forehead. He says, “Okay.”


“Take off your clothes,” Castiel orders, “And lie on your back.”

Dean reaches to pull his t-shirt over his head and Castiel leans down to dig their stash of lube and condoms out from underneath the driver’s side chair. When he emerges, Dean is struggling with his belt. Castiel pulls his hands away and undoes the buckle, pulling the leather out and setting it on the car floor.

He remarks to Dean, “Your hands are shaking.”

“Yeah,” Dean breathes.

“You’ll be okay,” Castiel says, “I promise. I’ll take good care of you.”

He strips Dean of his shoes and socks and the rest of his clothing, then, working without speaking. Once Dean is naked and spread out on the seat in front of him, Castiel pulls off his own clothing, letting it pool on the car floor beside Dean’s. When he crawls over Dean, Dean jokes quietly, “Always knew I’d get deflowered in the back of my baby.”

Castiel rolls his eyes and ducks in for a long, happy kiss. Dean rests his hands on Castiel’s shoulder blades, each movement tentative. He’s afraid of being broken, but Cas wouldn’t break him. No, he’ll treat Dean with the respect and worship that he deserves, open him up nice and slow, so that when he slides inside it’ll barely sting at all.

He peppers kisses over Dean’s chest, tonguing the lines of the tattoo on his right side as he fumbles to open the slightly-slippery bottle of lubricant. He feels Dean stiffen up against him and pulls back to say, “This isn’t going to work if you’re so tense.”

“Sorry,” Dean says, “Fuckin’…nervous.”

“I know,” Cas responds, and kisses the corner of Dean’s mouth, “but it’s just me.”

He’s only up to one slick knuckle inside Dean when he groans. Dean looks incredible, ten times better than any fantasy that Castiel has indulged in. His legs are spread but crunched up in the limited space that the Impala’s backseat affords them, cheeks and chest flushed from the attention. He watches as Castiel fingers him quietly, careful with each push and pull of his finger. When he finds Dean’s prostate, Dean makes a noise that shouldn’t be legal, some filthy combination of a groan and a whimper.
“Do that again,” Dean whispers. He obliges, and Dean keens from the touch.

By the time that Castiel fits a second finger inside him, Dean is pliant and whining beneath him, whispering his name and asking for more. He doesn’t go faster or harder even when Dean asks, making sure to take his time with preparing Dean, making sure each stroke of his fingers is comfortable before he tries something new.

Castiel adds another slick of lube before he uses his third finger. Dean moans and says, “Stings a little.”

Stinging a little is better than feeling like you’re being split open, so Castiel takes that as a sign to proceed with caution.

“Cas, c’mon, you’re killing me,” Dean says, and then begs, “Baby, please.”

Dean’s pleas go straight to Castiel’s cock but he doesn’t give in, no matter how much he would like to. He takes all the time he thinks that he’ll need, and reduces Dean to a panting, mewling mess before he withdraws his fingers. He rolls a condom over his cock and covers himself in lube.

As the head of his cock presses against Dean’s hot entrance, he says, “You have to tell me if I’m hurting you.”

Dean nods and snaps, “Just go.”

Castiel steadies his cock with one hand and holds Dean’s legs open with the other, pushing inside one mind-blowing inch at a time. Dean is so tight around him, so perfect, and when he looks down at Dean’s slack smile and heavy-lidded eyes, his chest fills up, cup spilling over inside him and warmth hitting him from head to toe. Dean, his Dean, beneath him, sets his skin on fire.

Nonetheless, he holds still inside Dean until Dean says, “Go. Fuck. Do it.”

Castiel pulls out and thrusts back in with shallow movements of his hips at first. But when Dean begs to be fucked harder, he listens, withdrawing and slamming back in. The sensation of Dean wrapped tight around him over and over again has stars appearing behind Castiel’s eyes. He could actually die from this, right here, he thinks, and he would be happy. Dean clenches around him when he hits just the right place.

Castiel moans.

“Jesus, Dean,” he says, hips stuttering, and positions himself to move the same way.

The thrusting becomes erratic as Dean whines and cries out, too wrecked to even let the usual trail of dirty talk spill out of his lips. Castiel has just enough brain power to close his fingers around Dean’s erection and stroke him off as he fucks into Dean’s body, harder and harder.

Dean comes first and shouts, “Holy fucking shit, baby,” as white streaks his abdomen.

Cas braces himself with hands on either side of Dean’s head drives into his elastic body in hard thrusts, coming only minutes after Dean and groaning into his neck as he fills the condom.

For a long time, they just lie there, with Castiel collapsed over Dean in a sticky heap. But after a while, Dean moves his hands to cup Cas’ face, stroking over his cheeks before he plants a kiss on his lips. When he draws back, he smiles a little and says, “Hey.”

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel says.
They both fall apart, laughing.
Dean doesn’t say anything about his father’s humor being any better or worse after the dinner
deacle, but then, Dean never does speak much about his father in general. So they carry on as they
have been. Dean continues working in Bobby’s shop and toward the end of August, Meg talks her
manager at the local movie theater into giving Castiel a part time job. He comes home from every
shift reeking of synthetic butter and he makes minimum wage, but it’s nice having his own money.

Castiel gets to treat Dean to dinner (in spite of his protests) sometimes now, and this year for
Christmas he plans on saving for better gifts for Dean and Sam than he can typically afford to give.
It’s exciting, and he can’t help but preen when Mama says that she’s proud of him for it.

School starts and on the first day Charlie teases Castiel for shooting up another few inches over the
summer. He’s taller than all of his friends except Dean now, though Dean only has an inch on him.
He realizes that his best friends are all leaving this year, Meg and Charlie and quite a number of
students from the GSA.

Most of his classes today follow the standard first day of school formula: passing out syllabuses,
laying out the classroom rules and expectations, and playing aggravating get-to-know-you games
that, if nothing else, identify which raging douchebags to avoid for the duration of the class. Castiel is
cautiously taking an AP World History course that seems to contain fewer douchebags than some of
his other classes, but enough that he still keeps quiet and doesn’t participate in the game they play at
the end of the class period at all.

Halfway through the day an announcement filters out over the intercom that the last three quarters of
their final class period will be devoted to an assembly with their new principal, a man named
Zachariah that’s taking over since their previous school principal retired.

It promises to be about as boring as any pep assembly, but at least they’re getting out of their class for
a little.

After lunch when the assembly time rolls around, Castiel makes an attempt to ditch it entirely and
seek out Meg at The Shed, but is turned away by a serious-eyed school security guard so intent upon
herding him into the assembly that he walks him there.

Bitterly, Castiel takes his seat on the juniors’ section of the bleachers inside the gym by himself, and
finds himself wishing for the third or fourth time today that he could be a senior instead, with Charlie
and Meg. But no, he’s stuck sitting between a group of solemn-looking academics and a bunch of
boys laughing and shoving each other, referring to one another as “bro.” They stare for a second
when he takes the seat beside him and then laugh, though it’s not certain what they are laughing at. He isn’t wearing eyeliner but he does have a rainbow flag patch sewn onto the back of his jacket, so that’s probably it.

After the rest of the students trail in, the cheerleaders lead some kind of pep cheer and while the marching band plays. That part isn’t too bad, minus the irritating chatter of the guys next to Cas, going on about how hot the girls are and which cheerleader that they’d “like to get with.” Castiel recognizes one of the cheerleaders from his AP World History class, and has a moment of surprise when she makes eye contact and waves her pompom at him. He glances behind himself to make sure the wave was meant for him, and then offers a shy wave back.

The guys next to him mutter about her attention being “wasted on the fag.”

That’s just precious.

The performance ends and as the cheerleaders and band retreat to their designated seats at the front of the bleachers, their vice principal stands up and addresses them through a microphone.

“Welcome Smoky Bluff!”

A cheer erupts from the bleachers on all sides and the cheerleaders wave their pompoms above their heads from where they’re sitting below.

“It’s great to see you all in the halls again. I hope everyone I had a great summer,” – another cheer – “As you know, Principal Turner retired at the end of last year, and this year Smoky Bluff will be welcoming a new member to our team. Give it up for the brand new principal of Smoky Bluff High School, Principal Zachariah Milton!”

The students roar as a man in a pressed suit stalks forward across the gym, taking the microphone from the vice president. He doesn’t smile as he speaks, beginning with, “Thank you,” to quiet the student body before he goes on. “As your vice principal just said, my name is Mr. Milton. As I understand, your former principal Rufus Turner was well-loved by this school. I hope to uphold his legacy as an excellent leader of Smoky Bluff High School. However, I called this assembly this afternoon not only to introduce myself to you as your new principal, but also to introduce some new house rules.”

The students are quiet at that, and Castiel leans forward, frowning. He glances over at the seniors’ section of the bleachers and spots Charlie looking at him with a similar frown on her face before she offers up a shrug.

“The first is regarding the dress code. Shoulders are not permitted to be visible at all on students either male or female. Skirts must be no more than two inches above the knee, and ‘sagging’ is strictly forbidden,” Principal Milton says.

Okay, that’s not that bad. None of those things apply to Castiel, though the rule about keeping shoulders covered is a little more than ludicrous.

“The drink machines will no longer hold sodas, only waters and other healthy, staff-approved beverages.”

The students murmur at this. Whatever, Castiel thinks. It’s not like there isn’t a convenience store only a short drive away if he wants to grab a soda or something other than “staff-approved beverages.”

“Off-campus lunches are no longer permitted,” Milton goes on, “Students are restricted to lunch on
school grounds unless they have been signed out at the attendance office by a parent or guardian.”

The murmurs rise to an angry buzz of chatter. One of the rowdy boys on his left remarks, “Man, that’s total bullshit,” while the academic-looking students to his right frown with brows creased. Principal Turner allowed off-campus lunch for all students except for freshman, as long as they had the mark on their student ID that said it was okay by their parents.

“And finally, all afterschool clubs must resubmit application forms as well as have a staff sponsor to be considered an official Smoky Bluff club,” Mr. Milton says, “Thank you for your understanding and your patience. I look forward to a marvelous school year as your principal.”

Before the news can sink in, the marching band starts to play again and the cheerleaders jog to the center of the gym for a closing number.

All afterschool clubs.

That means GSA, Castiel realizes. He and Charlie will have to fill out all the paperwork as though the club is just starting this year, and they’ll have to find somebody on staff willing to be there for their cause. His mind sorts through teachers that he’d had that might be willing to do the deed for them, but as the assembly comes to close and the students begin to mill out in one, giant mass, he can’t come up with anyone that would be interested in staying late after school on Thursdays to help some queer kids have a safe space.

What the hell is Principal Milton’s problem? Is he purposely trying to suck everything halfway decent out of attending a public school?

Castiel misses Principal Turner already, and he didn’t even really know the guy.

X

“And now we have to submit our club application all over again. Not only that, but we have to find somebody to sponsor the GSA,” Castiel seethes and paces the ground inside Bobby’s shop. It’s after hours, but Dean decided to work late to finish detail work on a car whose front was smashed up in an accident. He’s covered in grime from his fingers to the toes of his work boots, and somehow still manages to look good.

Dean wipes the sweat off of his forehead with the red handkerchief from his back pocket, and smears more dirt and grease over his face.

Castiel laughs, and Dean ducks to check himself out in one of the side-view mirrors of his patient.

“Damn it,” he mutters, and tries wiping off the smear with the sleeve of his jumpsuit. It does little to help, and he ends up giving a resigned sigh and turning back to Cas to say, “Who’re you gonna ask to sponsor you guys?”

“We don’t know,” Cas says, “Charlie doesn’t know any teachers that are right for the job and I couldn’t come up with any, either.”

“But he said staff member, right? Not just teachers?”

“I think so,” Cas says.

“Then ask Pam,” Dean shrugs.

“Pam Barnes? As in my dean?”
“Yeah, her,” Dean says, “She’s tight with Mama, isn’t she?”

Castiel licks his lips to wet them and fixes his gaze on the shop floor. He scratches a hand through his hair and says, “I guess I could run it by Charlie and see if she thinks it’s worth a shot.”

“You should,” Dean says, and in one swift move, he’s only a centimeter from Cas’ face. He cradles Cas’ jaw in his grease-smudged hands and kisses him, smelling earthy and sweaty and like the underbelly of the car that he was just doing work on.

Cas nudges him back and complains, “You’re dirty, Dean.”

“Dirty for you, maybe,” Dean grins, and leans in for another kiss. He nips down on Castiel’s lower lip and succeeds in coaxing a whine out of him. Dean’s fingers come up from the collar of Cas’ t-shirt to thread through the hair at the base of neck. He pulls them closer, kisses him harder, until they’re both breathless and Dean has an obvious erection underneath the blue fabric of his jumpsuit.

Castiel lifts his brows at Dean’s predicament and Dean laughs a little. He says, “Sammy’s over at his friend Ruby’s tonight, and dad’s supposed to be out on the town with Bobby. You wanna get clean together?” He bounces his eyebrows and Castiel shoves him, but they both chuckle and kiss as Dean wipes down his hands and goes through the motions of locking everything up.

The walk back to Sugar Lane is pleasant and warm, though Castiel manages to get at least two bug bites in that short amount of time and scratches them all the way to the Winchester trailer, at least until they’re inside and Dean pulls his hands back and circles his grip around Castiel’s wrists. He presses Cas back into the front door and drags his hips along Castiel’s, huffing out a quiet breath and saying against his neck, “Gorgeous for me, hm?”

“Dean, knock it off,” Cas says, and elbows him back, “I’m covered in engine grease.” Dean still reels Castiel in by the waist and plants a wet kiss on his cheek.

And so Castiel gets dragged into the bathroom, where they both strip their clothing. Dean’s erection has gone down, but stands back attention once they’re both under the stream of hot water in the shower. He kisses Castiel again, but when Cas gently pushes him away and says they need to wash, he doesn’t complain. Dean just smiles.

Castiel runs a bar of ivory soap over Dean’s skin, turning him so that he faces Dean’s back. He works the suds into Dean’s muscles, skimming his palms over the freckles dotting Dean’s shoulders. He presses the pads of his thumbs into the flesh over Dean’s shoulder blades and kneads, working out the kinks gained from Dean’s adventure with overtime. Dean tosses his head back and lets out a long moan, and Castiel takes the opportunity to kiss a stretch of wet, soapy skin on the back of Dean’s neck.

“Goddamn, Cas,” Dean says, and with a final sigh wiggles himself out from under Castiel’s hands to press his tongue into Castiel’s mouth, licking and biting, hot and searching. Cas can feel Dean’s cock graze against his leg and whimpers into the kiss.

“Fuck me,” Dean says.

“Mm?” is all that Cas can manage to that.

“You had a shit day and I want somebody to turn me into Jell-O,” Dean reasons, “So fuck me.”

Shower sex is far too complicated for Castiel’s tastes, so they hasten to clean themselves and don’t even bother to dry off before leaping into Dean’s bunk. Cas preps Dean quickly and sinks into him, biting marks onto his chest that only they will know are there. Then Dean pushes Cas onto his back
and rides back on his cock until they both come, panting and pleased.

They have enough brain power to dress and move to the couch to watch a movie, though they end up making out and falling asleep instead of actually paying attention.

Dean is wonderful.

X

Dean proves to be wonderful two days in a row when he signs in as a visitor during Castiel’s lunch period and brings him a burrito bowl from Chipotle. They eat together outside since the weather is still fair and watch a couple guys toss a football back and forth while a couple of girls in bubble-skirted dresses sit cross-legged in the grass a few feet away and weave flower crowns out of the dandelions growing between the school’s lawn and the sidewalk. Castiel talks about his classes and Dean asks if he and Charlie have spoken to Ms. Barnes yet, which they haven’t, though Charlie seemed on board with the idea when he brought it to the table.

He tells Dean about the nice cheerleader in his AP World History class, whose name turns out to be Sarah Blake.

“Guess I’d better be careful,” Dean jokes, “Would want you getting lured away by a hot cheerleader.”

“Dean,” Cas sighs, and rolls his eyes, “I’m just happy that she’s a junior like me. Charlie and Meg are leaving, and they’re both applying to out-of-state colleges, so it’s just gonna be us next year. And just me here at school.”

“Sammy’ll be here next year,” Dean points out.

“That’s true,” agrees Castiel, and has visions of Sam Winchester eating lunch with him next year, probably in the corner of the cafeteria because neither of them really fits in. But that wouldn’t happen, because Sam can speak to people much more easily than Castiel. He’ll make friends right away, of that Cas can be sure. He doesn’t know where that would leave him.

They throw the remnants of their meal in one of the wire mesh trash cans outside the school building when they finish eating, and Dean walks Cas back to the double doors. There, he smiles and says, “I’ll see you later, ‘kay? Text me,” and winks before he presses an instant-long kiss to Castiel’s lips.

“Bye, Dean,” Castiel says, and smiles all the way into the school.

Until he’s stopped by a familiar man in a suit.

Principal Milton looks even more terrifying up close, with shadowed eyes and little hair.

“You,” he says softly.

“Me?” Castiel says, and glances behind him to make sure that he’s the one being spoken to.

“Yes, you. What is your name?” Principal Milton asks.


“Castiel Novak,” Principal Milton says, rolling the name around in his mouth, “We don’t tolerate public displays of affection at this school. This is your one warning. I hope I will never see something like that little show outside again.”
“But,” Castiel says, and makes a face, “The school policy is that it’s okay as long as it doesn’t last longer than two seconds? You didn’t say anything about a policy change at the assembly yesterday.”

“I won’t warn you again, Mr. Novak,” Principal Milton says. He turns on the heel of his patent leather shoes and clicks off across the tile.

And then, to Castiel’s equal parts dismay and fury, Principal Zachariah Milton and his expensive suit and fancy shoes stride right past a cozy couple with their lips locked together against the atrium staircase – a couple made up of one boy and one girl.

“What the hell?”

Castiel simmers over the incident for the rest of the week without telling anybody, not even Dean or Mama or Gabriel. He keeps thinking that it’s not possible that what happened really did happen, and that the incident was a mere misunderstanding. Maybe Principal Milton didn’t see the couple next to the stairs? He certainly seems strict enough to reprimand for the barest touch of lips.

So it was a misunderstanding. That’s what he chooses to believe.

On Friday, Castiel and Charlie visit Ms. Barnes in her office with all the afterschool club paperwork that they’ve both filled out as president and vice president of the GSA. Nerves make him fidget in the cramped waiting area room outside her office, and Charlie has to rest a hand on his knee to get him to stop jiggling his leg.

“Relax,” she says.

“I can’t relax,” Cas mutters back.

Charlie just gives him a good-natured sock to the shoulder and says, “Cool your guns, 3PO. It’ll be fine.”

Charlie, it turns out, is right. Not only does Pam sign on as the GSA’s new staff sponsor, but she shares with a wink that she “swings both ways,” and that she’s proud to see that the members of the GSA are maintaining the club, even with the new rules and hoops to jump through. When Charlie and Cas shuffle together all their paperwork and ensure that their ts are crossed and is dotted and slip the complete packet into the inbox at the principal and vice principal’s office, he feels much better than he did before.

Cas returns to Sugar Lane with a skip in his step, one ts stays with him all the way through working on his math assignment and even as Mama Missouri drops him off for his shift at work, which promises to be busy with the Friday night rush of teenagers and date-goers.

Some girl slips him her phone number when she signs her receipt for popcorn and a large Icee, and although Castiel doesn’t intend to save it, he smiles at the idea that somebody thinks he’s attractive and intends to tell Dean when they hang out for their date tomorrow (which will probably consist of a trip to the arcade and a drive in the Impala to someplace secluded where they can mess around).

At the end of the night, Gabriel shows up to pick him up in Mama Missouri’s van. Castiel falls asleep on the short drive home and has to force himself to shower when he gets home, if only to wash off the popcorn smell so he doesn’t reek like a concession stand when he and Dean hang out tomorrow.

With the remains of summer heat still in the air, Castiel forgoes a blanket and pajamas and sleeps in his boxers with a sheet tucked over him, though the process of getting there involves too much
tossing and turning for his tastes.

It’s no surprised, then, when shouting from outside the open bedroom window jars him awake. Gabriel groans and swears under his breath, and Castiel stands up to peek his head outside the opening.

It’s coming from the Winchester trailer. Again. He sighs and reaches for his phone, sending off a quick Hey, text me if you want me to come over. Sounds like a bad fight.

Dean doesn’t text back, obviously. There’s too much yelling, and the sound of something glass breaking. Castiel toys with the idea of walking over there and interrupting the argument, but concludes that Dean would be mad at him if he did.

“Good God,” Balthazar complains from the bunk above, “Can your boyfriend and his father ever shut up?”

Castiel punches up at Balthazar’s mattress through the slats supporting it, and after an irritated oof, Balthazar agrees, “All right, fine. I get it. No acknowledging the giant elephant in the trailer park.”

After several more loud minutes, Castiel sees the trailer door get thrown open. He expects to see Dean trudging to Bobby’s mobile home. It isn’t. John Winchester’s stockier, more square figure swaggeres out of the trailer. Dean follows and shouts, “Dad, you’re fucking toasted! You can’t drive. Get back in the fucking trailer.”

“Watch your fucking language, Dean,” John snaps back, “I’ll drive wherever I goddamn please. You know why? Because I’m a fucking adult.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Dean says, “See if I care if you kill yourself!”

John doesn’t bother shouting back to that. He pries open the driver’s door on the Impala and slams it closed. The engine comes on, and seconds later, the Impala screeches out of the Sugar Lane entrance with John Winchester at the wheel.

Judging by the nature of the argument, Castiel really would like to check on Dean, but if he doesn’t text that he wants Castiel there, then he won’t come. Dean doesn’t like to be treated like an infant, and sometimes Castiel’s concern makes him feel that way. So he waits, lying back on his pillow with his crappy cellphone a couple inches from the end of his nose.

It lights up.

Dean’s text reads, yeah, need u.

“Wife come calling?” Balthazar asks.

Castiel punches his mattress again from the underside before he knocks open his dresser drawer and fastens a pair of jeans over his boxers, shimmying into a t-shirt and pocketing his cellphone before he heads out to Dean’s place.

Dean answers the door for Castiel before he can even knock, yanking him into a tight hug. He murmurs, “Gotta be quiet. Sammy’s sleeping.”

“After all that noise?” Castiel whispers back.

Dean shrugs, “He’s used it.”
Dean kisses him and Castiel kisses back, because this is what Dean needs. Dean needs touch, needs somebody that won’t shout at him. Still, he doesn’t like the way that this particular fight ended, and so when Dean herds him back to sit back on the couch, Cas stops him from another clash of lips to ask, “What happened?”

“Seriously, man?” Dean says, “Do I have to talk about it?”

“Your dad just took off,” Castiel says, “I haven’t seen him do that before.”

“Well, screw him,” Dean snips, “He thinks just ‘cause shit didn’t go his way that he gets to get shitfaced whenever the hell he wants. You know what that crap does to Sammy? It’s bullshit. He’s our dad. He knows better.”

Castiel noses at Dean’s neck and applies his lips to the skin there, if only to get Dean to continue. Under the affection, Dean melts a little. He rests his forehead against Castiel’s shoulder, breath quiet and constant before he says, “He didn’t get that job he interviewed for. Took it pretty hard. I wasn’t too hard on him, was I?”

Castiel sighs. They both know that that’s a loaded question. He rests his palm on the back of Dean’s head and pets over his hair while he considers what to say. They sit tangled like that for several minutes without talking, just Cas sitting back on the couch and Dean in his lap, breathing but not facing Castiel.

“You should apologize when he returns,” Castiel at last settles upon telling Dean.

Dean groans.

“I hate being wrong,” he mutters, and then adds with a bitter snap, “Why am I always wrong?”

“You aren’t,” Castiel says, “but your father is…”

“Weak?” suggests Dean.

“Vulnerable,” Castiel replies.

“He doesn’t have the goddamn time to be vulnerable,” Dean grinds out, but as Castiel’s hand moves from his hair and to his spine, stroking and touching, he concedes, “Fucking hell.”

“I know,” Cas says.

Dean’s lips brush against the soft skin of Castiel’s throat. Cas lets him kiss there, lets him lick and suck and nibble, because he knows that this makes Dean feel better. Hebreathes in Castiel’s scent and slips one hand underneath the hem of his t-shirt, reaching up to toy with a nipple while he makes hickeys bloom on Cas’ summer-tanned skin.

Dean exhales against his own kisses and then moves his lips to Castiel’s mouth, damply pressing from neck to jaw and on, over the short layer of stubble on Cas’ jaw and to his chapped lips.

“Taste good, baby,” Dean says. He says it like he’s saying a prayer, a prayer that only Castiel can hear. Dean strokes inside Castiel’s mouth, hands wandering under his shirt. When he breaks away, he says, “Need to taste more.”

He scoots back off of Castiel’s lap and kneels on the floor in between Castiel’s open legs. Deft fingers undo the zipper of Cas’ jeans and have his underwear down and cock free in instants. Dean isn’t in the mood to tease tonight, that much is clear as he strokes Cas into being fully hard, and
kisses the head of his erection.

Without ceremony, Dean swallows Cas down and bobs his head. He knows now how to work past his gag reflex – the sensation of Dean’s hot throat swallowing around him makes Cas’ hips buck up of their own accord. Dean takes it in stride, working with his tongue and mouth to take Castiel apart piece by piece.

Castiel bites down when he comes so that they don’t wake Sam. Dean swallows and crawls back up onto Cas’ lap with a smile, pulling him into a long, too-tender kiss. When they pull apart, Dean rests his forehead against Castiel’s and closes his eyes.

“Dean?”

“Mm.”

“I’d like to reciprocate,” Castiel says.

“Kay,” agrees Dean, and shifts off of Castiel. He doesn’t even wait for Cas to finish rearranging himself back into his underwear and button his jeans back up, just pulls down his sweatpants and gets himself hard.

Castiel leans in and licks up the length.

Ring, ring, ring.

“Goddamnit,” Dean growls, “Keep going.”

Ring, ring, ring.

“Ugh, fuck it,” Dean says, and gives Cas’ head a ginger push back, “Just give me a second. Who the fuck calls at this hour?” He tucks himself into his sweatpants and disappears into the kitchen.

“Hello?” Dean says, voice rough.

Quiet.

“What? Are you sure?”

More quiet.

“Shit. I mean, shoot. Sorry. Okay. We’ll be there. Thank you,” Dean hangs up the phone. He looks frantic when he returns to Cas and says, “Cas, can you ask Mama if we can get a ride or if I can borrow the van, or – fuck. I need to go wake up Sammy.” His voice cracks, and Dean looks like he may actually cry.

“What’s going on?” Cas asks, and climbs to his feet.

“My dad. Fucking – Christ, that idiot. He hit some lady with the Impala,” Dean says brokenly, “They’re both in the hospital.”
Let It All Drop

Chapter Notes

Warning for some issues with low self worth (on Cas' end)

Chapter Track: Spitting Venom – Modest Mouse

Let It All Drop

Less than fifteen minutes later, they find themselves strapped into Missouri’s van, speeding toward Lawrence Memorial Hospital faster than Castiel has ever seen Mama drive in the past two years of living with her. Though she’s decked in a robe, slippers, and pajama pants patterned in pugs, she looks dead serious, lips in a flat line and eyes trained on the road. Sam sits in the front seat beside Missouri in his pajamas, eyes wide and shadowed from interrupted sleep.

Dean won’t look at Castiel. He just stares at his own hands where they’re clenched into fists in his lap. But when Cas rests his palm gently on Dean’s back, just under his neck, Dean edges into the touch. A soft breath puffs out from between his lips and he finally shifts to look Castiel.

“I told my dad to go kill himself,” Dean says, “I told him I wouldn’t care if he did.”

“You were angry,” Cas says.

“That’s not a fucking excuse,” Dean snips back, “I shouldn’t have said it. God, I’m such a fuck up.”

“Stop it,” Cas whispers, voice hard, and tugs at Dean’s arm so that he’ll look him in the eye, “I’m not going to tell you it was a good thing to say, but you’re blaming this fiasco on yourself and that’s ridiculous. Did you put the drink in your father’s hand? Did you force it down his throat? Did you make him sit behind the wheel?”

“I may as well have,” Dean says.

Cas’ grip on Dean’s arm tightens and he says, “Yes or no, Dean.”

“No, but –”

“Yes or no, Dean.”

“No, but –”

“Your father is a grown man, and it is his decision-making that led him to this. Okay? But we’re not going to talk semantics and debate over whose fault this is, because right now, we just need to focus making sure that your father is okay,” Castiel says. Dean doesn’t reply to this, just keeps worrying his lower lip with his teeth, so Castiel jostles him a little and says, “All right?”

Dean runs a hand through his hair and says, “Yeah, okay. All right.”

Castiel moves his hand from Dean’s arm to his fingers and laces their hands together, giving Dean a reassuring squeeze. Dean doesn’t really grip him back, but he doesn’t shrug Castiel away, and that’s
Missouri screeches into the Lawrence Memorial parking lot and wedges the van in a space between two smaller cars. They throw the doors open and all sprint toward the inside of the hospital. Castiel is the only one in actual clothing – everyone else is in their pajamas.

“Bobby won’t be too far behind us,” Missouri says, “Called him when you called me.”

The inside of the hospital isn’t as bad as some hospitals that Castiel’s seen the innards of, and he’s seen the inside of too many hospitals. The walls are more taupe than white, so the lobby feels less like a hospital and more like a corner coffee shop. Missouri leads them to the front desk, and before the desk attendant can even ask how they need to be helped, demands, “I’ve got John Winchester’s sons with me. They need to see him.”

The desk attendant types something into her computer and says, “He’s in surgery right now, so I’m afraid you’ll have to wait. All three boys are his sons?”

“No, just these two,” Missouri says, and manhandles Dean and Sam in front of her, “The other one’s the boyfriend.”

The desk attendant eyes Castiel and says, “John Winchester’s boyfriend?”

“No, my boyfriend,” Dean snaps, “When can we see him? How is he? What’s going on?”

“Please calm down, Mr. Winchester,” the desk attendant says, all soothing tones, “Someone will be out to speak with you shortly. In the meantime please take a seat in the waiting area.” She indicates behind them, to an arrangement of chairs, some standard waiting room chairs, others ringed around tables with vases of faux flowers in the middle.

Dean stalks toward the area and chooses one of the regular chairs, across from a twenty-something with curly hair, wire-rimmed glasses and a knitting project in her lap. She lifts her eyes when the four of them settle in the chair, but quickly looks down again when Dean glares.

Castiel can’t help but feel helpless. He wants to help but he doesn’t know how, so he keeps rubbing Dean’s back, over and over again, without saying anything at all, because knowing him he’ll probably say the opposite of anything helpful. Dean tenses and seethes under the palm of Cas’ hand but he doesn’t say to stop, and so Castiel keeps going.

It feels odd to sit in the waiting room of a hospital. In the past, Castiel has only ever spent time beyond the waiting area, in a room in a bed clothed in white sheets, wearing a hospital gown. Some of his earliest memories take place in the pediatric ward in Via Christi in Wichita. He spent several weeks recovering from the fasting incident there when he was seven, and suspects they kept him there longer than strictly necessary because they didn’t want to send him straight into the system. Beyond that, he ended up in hospitals more than a few times in his life – when he was eight and his foster brother broke his arm, when he was ten and his foster mother went off the deep end from postpartum depression and tried to drown him in the bathtub, when he was twelve and Victor found him beneath the underpass with other runaways – he’s familiar with the workings of them.

But never once has he been here, waiting for news of somebody else.

And he’s never been in a hospital when Victor Henriksen hasn’t been waiting to take him away as soon as he left.

His hand has stopped on Dean’s back, and Dean must notice, because he asks, “You okay?”
Cas gives him a wry smile, “I think I should be the one asking that.”

“Well, you’re not,” Dean says quietly, “I’m asking you.”

Castiel considers it for a moment. He doesn’t feel badly, just strange. So he answers in turn, “I think I’m all right. I’ve just always been the one hurt, not the other way around. It’s kind of weird.”

Dean hums in response to this. As he laces his fingers with Castiel’s, a nurse in mint-colored scrubs steps into the waiting area, a clipboard in her hands. She calls out, “John Winchester?”

Dean shoots to his feet and Sam is quick to follow, but the nurse motions for them to sit back down. She says, “Your father is still in surgery, but the doctors are optimistic.”

“What happened to him?” Sam asks. He sounds more like a child in those four words than he’s ever sounded to Castiel in their two years of friendship, timid and afraid.

“He made an illegal left and t-boned another vehicle,” explains the nurse, “Luckily he was wearing his seatbelt, or we’d be having a different conversation entirely. There’s significant damage to his left side. Your father broke several bones in his left arm and bruised his ribs. There was some shrapnel embedded dangerously close to his iliac artery, and so we have been very careful about his surgery.”

“When can we see him?” demands Dean.

“As soon as the surgery and his other injuries are tended to, you’ll be allowed to visit, though your father will most likely still be under,” the nurse answers, “The bones in his arm still need to be set and he has a few superficial wounds that will most likely need stitches.”

Dean groans and Sam fidgets in his lap.

“How long is this crap going to take?” Dean grinds out.

The nurses looks miffed at Dean’s attitude, but answers patiently, “At least another hour, Mr. Winchester. If you’d like, you can get coffee or food in our cafeteria while you wait, or put a movie on the television there in the corner,” she shifts her attention to Missouri and asks, “Are you – the stepmother?”

Missouri looks tempted to roll her eyes and answers, “Family friend.”

“When he wakes up, I’m gonna kill him,” Bobby mutters.

Only to be admonished by Ellen, “Robert Singer.”

The wait is tedious. No one wants to wander off and be caught unawares elsewhere when John’s procedures are over, but they’re all stretched too thin to manage conversation. So they all end up sitting in uncomfortable, fidgeting silence, a silence interrupted only by the clicking of the woman’s
Finally, the same nurse that spoke to them before emerges in the waiting room an hour and a half later to take Dean and Sam back to visit John. Then Castiel really can’t wait. He bounces his leg in frustration and is torn between wanting to jump up and follow them or fall asleep. The time edges closer and closer to three in the morning, but every time his eyelids droop, Castiel forces his eyes back open, not wanting to miss anything.

But then Dean and Sam come out, looking grim and standing close to one another, like they’re afraid of losing each other on the way back to the waiting room.

“He looks like shit,” Dean announces to them all, “but he’s breathing, so that’s something.”

“Looks like you got somethin’ else to tell us,” Bobby says.

Dean bristles and so Sam answers this time, “They had him cuffed to the bed. The lady dad hit is dead…so they’re arresting him for involuntary manslaughter. I don’t think there’s any way that he’s going to get out of it. The lady he hit – her family was there, a-and –”

Sam starts to cry. Automatically, Dean pulls his brother in for a hug and holds Sam against his chest. Sam’s too tall now for Dean to rest his chin on the top of his brother’s head, so he just lets Sam rest his cheek against his shoulder and runs his hand up and down Sam’s spine, lips set in a thin, tight line.

The hospital has them fill out some paperwork, and Castiel hangs back while it all happens. He overhears Dean murmuring to Bobby that a police officer is supposed to visit with him tomorrow and take his statement about what happened before John took off in the Impala. It all happens in a blur, a blend of hospital staff and quiet reassurances between them and Dean’s steely silence.

Dean and Sam are going home with Bobby and Ellen, and so they split in the parking lot. Cas presses a kiss to Dean’s cheek, but Dean is despondent, and says nothing other than, ‘Night, Castiel.” No baby, no dude or man or anything else that Dean calls him, not even Cas.

Just Castiel.

X

Dean’s quiet continues through the next day. He sends a text to Castiel on Saturday afternoon canceling their date for the day, though Castiel had already figured that was a given, considering. But then Dean doesn’t text or call again. Cas waits until late on Sunday to finally send, Hey, what’s going on? Haven’t heard from you and I’m starting to get worried.

All that Cas receives in return is a terse dont worry about me will txt u later an hour later.

Dean does not text him later, and with the Impala smashed up, he can’t give Sam and Cas rides to school anymore. When they do see each other, it’s briefly, and his words about John’s condition and the arrest are clipped, though on Monday he does accept Cas’ offer to hang out at the yard for a while Dean works.

Later, when Dean fucks him, it’s dispassionate. Dean holds Cas afterward but doesn’t do any of the things that he usually likes to do when they’re pressed up against each other in a sweaty, post-coital mess. He doesn’t run his fingers through Cas’ hair and tell him how much he loves it sticking up after sex, doesn’t nip at Cas’ ear lobes or kiss the back of his neck, doesn’t skate his fingers over Cas’ soft belly right before he falls asleep. He just…lies there.
Castiel tries not to take it personally, but as the week wears on he starts worrying again. His mind whirs and rotates like a merry-go-round, thinking of all the things that he could be doing better for Dean and Sam. He’s bad at being good to people, he knows that. No one ever taught him how to be good to people, and when he tries, he never seems to do it right. Still, he wants to do something.

Finally, after the bus drops Castiel off at the Sugar Lane stop after school, Cas knows what he wants. He enlists Gabriel’s help as he sheds his backpack in their bedroom, since on his own Castiel is a pretty dismal baker. Gabriel’s good with sweets, and when Cas asks him to help make Dean and Sam a pie, “Anything to get you to stop moping around like fucking Eeyore.”

They decide on apple pie because it’s a classic and Dean’s favorite. Gabriel drives them to the grocery store to gather all the ingredients. Making pie actually turns out to be kind of fun, though they do make a mess of the kitchen, get into a subsequent flour battle, and emerge from their project covered from head to toe in white powder.

Castiel showers and Gabriel cleans the kitchen while the pie is in the oven. It’s beautiful when complete, which Cas credits to Gabriel’s baking talent and nothing to do with anything that he did. Gabe helps him neatly wrap the top with Glad wrap. Dean’s still on his shift at the salvage yard, so Cas will walk it over there and surprise him.

He starts feeling like an idiot about halfway into the five-minute walk to the yard next door.

What if Dean doesn’t like it?
What if this was the wrong thing to do?
What if he just messed up all over again?

But Castiel’s feet continue to carry him forward, even if his brain is dragging him back to Sugar Lane to hide the pie someplace it’ll never be found.

“Hey, kid,” Bobby says, when Castiel pulls open the door to the shop lobby.

“Hello,” he says, “Is Dean in the shop? I brought him a pie.”

A faint smile curls the ends of Bobby’s lips, and his eyes crease at the corners. He murmurs, “Don’t know how I ever thought you might not be good for him,” and then, “Yeah, he’s out there, workin’ his ass off instead a’ addressing his issues like a goddamn normal human being. Try and get him to talk, will you?”

“I’ll try my best,” Castiel says, “but it hasn’t been working very well so far.”

“If anyone can get that boy to let it all out, it’s you, kid,” Bobby says, “Good luck.”

Castiel rounds the front desk and ducks into the shop. It smells like grease, cheap coffee, and fast food. Dean has his hands under the hood of a classic car that Castiel can’t identify, and Dean will probably tell him all about later.

Cas clears his throat and says, “Dean?”

Dean straightens and wipes his hands on his handkerchief. When he sees Cas he looks surprised. He asks crustily, “What are you doing here?”

Cas falters, eyes sinking down to the pie in his hands. He gnaws on his lower lip and then looks back up to say, “I…Gabriel and I made a pie. Mostly Gabe, but. I thought it might cheer you up. Or help.
Or, I don’t know. This was a stupid idea.”

Dean rubs a hand through his hair and his gaze softens.

“Fuck,” Dean says, and lets out a long, frustrated breath, “You didn’t have do that, Cas.”

“I wanted to,” Cas says, frustrated at how small his own voice sounds.

Dean crosses the shop and takes the pie from Cas hands. He sets it aside on one of the beaten filing cabinets that line the shop just outside the door to the lobby. He cups Cas’ face and leans forward to kiss him. It’s a ginger kiss, but more tender than anything that they’ve shared since the night in the hospital.

“You’re too good to me,” Dean says.

“No I’m not,” Cas replies, “I haven’t been doing the right things. I haven’t –”

“Cas,” Dean cuts him off, “Baby. I’ve been a total douchebag. I know I have. I’m just – things have been pretty shitty, and I’m not. Well. I’m just bad at this kind of crap. And you’re here still, bein’ all nice when I don’t deserve it.”

“Dean –”

“Can you just give me some more time to sort my shit out?” Dean asks, “I’m sorry. You know, for being such a dick. I just – don’t want to talk right now, okay? Thanks for the pie. That’s a real nice thing of you to do.’’ He leans in and applies a kiss to the center of Cas’ forehead, running dirt-stained fingers through Cas’ hair before he pulls away and says, “Got work to do.”

Castiel has a feeling that he’s just been dismissed.

His stomach sinks and he says, “Goodbye, Dean,” before he turns and walks back through the door.

“No-go, then?” Bobby asks.

Castiel just shakes his head and says, “I did try.”

“I know you did, kid,” Bobby says, “I know.”

Demons reappear in his drawings.

Castiel hasn’t drawn demons in a long time. He opted to start drawing angels, or his friends. Sometimes those are the same thing. But now it’s nothing but gore: missing eyes, spilling guts, horned creatures dancing and laughing, and so much fire. He colors the sketches with the colored pencils that Dean gave him so long ago until he gets depressed over them – because they’re Dean’s pencils.

So he stops using color and just smudges charcoal to do his shading.

His mood is so black that even Gabriel and Balthazar avoid teasing him. The only one of his foster siblings that he interacts with is Andy, who offers to share a joint with Cas. Castiel accepts, but his high doesn’t make him feel that much better, just more resigned. Andy looks a little wounded that he couldn’t help, so Castiel still says thank you when they finish the joint.

He turns to a fresh page in his sketchbook and draws a burly, pig-eyed demon, one that looks like the
foster father he had when he was twelve. He draws thorns and scales on his skin and a stream of fire from his nostrils. At first he thinks to fill in the background with a throne of skulls, but instead of pictures, his pencil writes words into the white space still on the page.

WORTHLESS PIECE OF SHIT

STUPID FUCKING FAG

WASTE OF SPACE

NO-GOOD, CHEAP-ASS KID

“Whoa.”

Castiel jerks up.

Dean is there.

“What…what are you doing here?” he asks.

Sam is behind Dean, and both of them having rolling suitcases at their sides. A duffel rests on one of Dean’s shoulders, and his guitar in its cloth case over the other.

Dean doesn’t answer his question, just stares at the sketchbook and asks, “What’s up with this, dude?”

“It’s a drawing,” Castiel says.

“I know that,” Dean says, “You haven’t drawn monsters like this for a while.”

“Yeah.”

“Why does it say all that crap behind him?” asks Dean, who at least has the decency to look abashed by the stream of hate and horror that Castiel left on the page.

And it’s Dean, so he’s going to tell the truth, even when the logical part of his brain is telling him that it would be better to just keep his problems to himself. He mutters to the sketch, “It’s stuff that people have said to me. Not Mama or you just…people. What are you doing here, Dean?”

Dean looks like he wants to comment again on the drawing, so Castiel closes the sketchbook’s cover over it and tucks it back between his mattress and the wall.

Dean shuffles a little and says, “Me n’ Sam are staying here for a while.”

“What?” Cas manages.

“Dad’s better but he pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter for a lighter sentence, and he’s gonna be locked up for a while,” Dean explains, “I asked Bobby and Ellen if they could take us in, but they’ve got so much shit on their plates, they just. They said no. So me and Sammy are here for now.”

“For how long?” asks Castiel.

“Well, dad’s got five years behind bars and then some kind of court-ordered rehab,” Dean says, and then shrugs, “So, for a while, I guess. We’re sleeping in the other room with Raph and Uriel.”
“Oh.”

So this is why Dean has been so quiet and so pained. Castiel feels guilty for being selfish and stupid about Dean’s behavior, so he stands up and says, “Let me help with your things,” and Dean nods his consent.

The layout of Raph and Uriel’s room is much the same as the one that Castiel shares with his other foster brothers, furnished with two bunk beds and other necessities. Raph has a poster of a football player mid-throw above his bed and some of the athletic awards that won at his junior high school last year, while Uriel favors a baseball player on his wall space. Both Uriel and Raph are there when Cas walks the Winchesters in, and neither of them looks surprised to see them. Mama must have kept them in the loop.

Dean throws his things onto the top bed on the empty bunk without a word and Sam neatly presses suitcase underneath the lower.

“Um,” Cas says, “I’ll just…go now.”

Dean turns sharply, “No, dude, don’t be like that.”

“Be like what?” asks Cas.

“Look, I’m sorry about everything that’s been going on, okay? I’ve been a grade-A asshole,” Dean says, “But I’ve just had so much shit to sort out I kind of didn’t have a choice. I’m serious, though. I’m sorry.”

“Okay,” Cas relents, like he knew that he would, “Apology accepted.”

Dean looks relieved. “Cool,” he says, “we should hang out and watch a movie in the den or something. Break in the ol’ place.”

Castiel agrees.

The air between them all is pained and awkward at first as they debate over which movie to watch (Sam’s choice wins: Up). But as they settle in, everything eases a little more. They throw big blankets over the floor and prop up some pillows, building a nest of the spare bedding in Mama Missouri’s linen closet before they microwave a bowl of popcorn to share. Dean throws his arm around Castiel and Castiel lets himself lean his head on Dean’s shoulder.

After Up and halfway through Robots, Mama Missouri calls them all for dinner. It doesn’t feel weird to have Sam and Dean eating with them since they’ve eaten together at Mama’s enough times as it is, but it does feel weird to see Dean smiling and joking, and laughing when Hester tells him a joke, even though it isn’t that funny.

Anna and Hester join them to finish watching Robots, after which they all get roped into watching Tangled, because Hester wants to and she just about always gets her way. Sam falls asleep before the movie is over, curling into Dean’s body heat and breathing evenly through the ending and the credits. Since nobody wants to wake him, Cas slides another movie into the DVD player, and they opt to have the Winchesters spend their first night at Mama’s in the den in her mobile home, instead of out at the boys’ home with Raph and Uriel.

“Cas?” Dean ventures.

They’re lying in their blanket pile on the floor. Sam is still pressed up against his brother, though Dean doesn’t seem to mind.
“What?” Cas asks.

Dean strokes the back of his knuckles over the curve of Cas’ cheekbone and stares. When he leans in and they kiss, Cas can feel his resolve and anger melting away. Dean tastes like dinner and their second batch of popcorn, and it’s good. He wants to wrap himself up in Dean forever, wants to forget how everything has been for the past week and a half.

“I missed you,” Dean says.

“You were the one being an asshole.”

“I know,” he replies, and kisses Cas again, “I’ll make it up to you…but not with Sammy here.” And he winks.

“Yes, please not with Sammy here,” Sam grumbles.

They laugh.
Living with Dean is stranger, stranger than Castiel knew it could be. Dean returns to being affectionate but still doesn’t discuss anything to do with his dad, closing off completely if Castiel tries to ask after John. They steal kisses when they can and trade harried hand jobs or suck each other off if they have a little more time. Raph and Uriel pretty adamantly do not change their habits, but the rest of their collective foster brothers sometimes make themselves scarce, which Castiel appreciates.

But some nights, like tonight, it’s nice to all be together. On the floor, Andy and Balthazar engage in an intense game of Speed, while Gabriel plays loud pop music from his laptop and calls the next match with the winner. Sam sits on the floor a few feet away staring at a homework assignment that’s been blank for at least a solid ten minutes.

Dean sits across from Cas his bunk, plucking at his guitar with a notebook in front of him. He murmurs to himself while he works, a concentrated catch between his brows. Castiel wants to ask what he’s writing but doesn’t, because Dean’s good about not badgering him about his private sketches.

Right now, the charcoal on his page meets to form a familiar figure – the one in front of him, Dean with his guitar, page open in front of him while he scribbles notes and lyrics. He tries to capture every detail, from the freckles across the bridge of his nose, to the way that his eyelashes look like they’re brushing the tops of his cheeks when he looks down at what he’s written and frowns.

All at once and very suddenly, Castiel wants to blurt at Dean, I love you.

And all at once and very suddenly, Castiel is afraid.

He closes the cover of his sketchbook and sets it aside. Castiel tries not to make it obvious that he just scared himself out of his wits. Calmly, he slides his feet into shoes and announces, “I’ll be right back,” though nobody even looks up or answers except for Sam, who waves and goes back to staring fruitlessly at his math assignment.

He jogs outside and along the entire length of the trailer park, trudging all the way down into the wooded area that surrounds the creek. Coming to the creek is the worst idea that he could have come up with in his moment of panic.

Now he’s stuck here remembering everything fun that he and Dean and Sam have done together, and he crumbles under the incredible weight of realization that he loves them. He loves both of the Winchesters, though each in strikingly different ways. Sam is the younger brother that he never knew he craved, the intelligent and naïve teenager that seeks out Castiel for guidance. And Dean…

Dean, he loves.

“Fuck,” he says, and slams his foot into a tree, “Fuck!”

Of course it would happen now. It would happen when Dean is more distant than ever, when he slams out anything that isn’t sex. A bitter, mirthless laugh escapes Castiel’s lungs. Unrequited love. It figures that of all the unbelievable bullshit that Castiel has suffered through, fate would add un-fucking-requited love to the list.
With a long, angry sigh, Castiel slogs through the weeds. It’s cool enough tonight that he wishes he brought a jacket with him, but figures some liquor’ll warm him up. He kneels down by one of the gnarled trees along the stream of water and reaches underneath the roots, where he and Dean have their alcohol stash hidden. He grabs their bottle of Fireball. It’s mostly gone, and on any other night he would have waited for Dean to be there to finish it off.

Tonight, he doesn’t give a shit. He screws open the cap and tips the liquor down his throat, furious. He’s furious at Dean for treating him like crap. He’s furious at John Winchester for drinking himself stupid and killing a woman. But mostly, Castiel’s just furious at himself. He’s furious because he let his walls crumble and he knew it, and he did nothing to stop it.

He did nothing to stop it, and look at where that got him.

He finishes the whiskey. It wasn’t much, maybe two shots left at the bottom. It’s enough, though, to have him buzzed. He throws the bottle and watches it smash against the trunk of a tree across the creek, unable to find it in him to care.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Castiel sits, and then lies down. He doesn’t care that he’s getting filthy this way. He just wants all this bullshit to end.

For whatever stupid reason, he finds his phone in his hand. There’s a text from Dean, but he doesn’t bother to read it. He thinks about who to call, wonders if maybe he’d feel better if he called Crowley and apologized and offered up his ass for another round of heartless fucking.

No, that’s a terrible idea. Castiel isn’t *that* drunk.

Instead, he finds his fingers fumbling with the contact for Charlie, and before he can second guess himself, he presses ‘Send’ and holds his cellphone against his ear. It only rings twice before Charlie picks up with a concerned, “Cas? What’s up?”

Castiel is silent. Now that her voice is on the line, he doesn’t know what to say to her.

“Castiel?”

“Sorry,” he grumbles, “I shouldn’t have called.”

“No, no. It’s okay,” Charlie says. Rustling noises sound from over the phone as she moves, and she says, “What’s going on?”

“I did something stupid.”

“How stupid?” Charlie asks, “Like, are we talking Ned Stark trusting Cersei stupid, or regular old stupid?”

“Ned Stark stupid,” Castiel whispers.

“Shit,” Charlie exclaims, “You need me to bail you out of jail or something? No, wait, they would have taken your phone. This isn’t about drugs, is it? I don’t think I can get involved with drugs. Did you join a gang? ‘Cause I don’t know if –”

“Charlie,” Castiel says, “It’s not about drugs and I didn’t join a gang.”
“Oh. Okay. Then what is it? Ned Stark stupid is pretty damn stupid, Cas. Unless you’re about to get your head whacked off, I don’t know what else it could be.”

“I fell in love,” Castiel says. Only then does he realize that he’s crying, pathetically. He snuffles and says, “I fell in love with Dean and I don’t know what to do.”

“Crap,” Charlie says, “I mean, I knew you loved him, but crap. That sucks. Where are you? I could pick you up? We could eat ice cream and watch Lord of the Rings.”

“I’m close to home,” he says and wipes the tears off of his face with his arm, “And yeah, yeah, that sounds good. I’ll walk back and stand by the park sign.”

“Okay. Cool. I’ll be over in a few. See you soon, all right? Don’t do anything else stupid,” Charlie says.

“I’ll try not to,” Castiel confirms.

It only takes Charlie ten minutes to reach him in her mom’s minivan. Castiel doesn’t want to talk much about his revelation, just wants to forget that he had it, but Charlie still makes him explain why he called her at eight at night on a school night, tipsy and crying in the woods about falling in love with Dean Winchester.

“I can’t love anybody right now,” he says while Charlie dishes up a bowl of butter pecan for him and mint chocolate chip for herself. The DVD menu to The Fellowship of the Ring plays on her television screen, and her parents seem to have caught onto the fact that their presence would be better suited elsewhere.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Charlie says, and sticks a spoon into his bowl before handing it to him.

“Fine. I can’t love Dean right now,” Cas says, “He’s got too much on his mind, with his dad and work and taking care of his brother. There isn’t room for me.”

Charlie frowns, and for a long time, she’s quiet. Probably because she knows that Castiel is right about Dean.

“I don’t think that’s true,” she finally tells him, “Dean has room for everyone. It’s part of what makes him Dean.”

But she does drop it after that, and they eat sweets and watch the movie until her parents venture downstairs and tell them both that it’s time to call it a night and Castiel needs to be taken back home so they’re not too tired at school tomorrow.

Charlie still doesn’t say anything as they drive back to Sugar Lane, but she does cover Castiel’s hand with hers when she pulls up in front of Missouri’s. She gives his fingers a squeeze and says, “Think about what I said. About Dean. I think you should think about telling him.”

“I’m not going to,” Castiel says, “But thank you. For tonight. It means a lot.”

Castiel climbs out of the Bradbury minivan and watches Charlie go before he ducks into the boys’ home. He walks straight past where Gabriel’s at their kitchen table snacking on a box of dry cereal and heads into the bathroom. He showers, wanting to get the grime from the creek off of his skin and hide the evidence that he’s been weeping on and off all night like a baby.

He does feel better by the time he’s swapped his clothes for pajamas and wriggled underneath his
covers. It’s dark and warm and safe in his bedroom. His foster brothers know not to bother him.

Except one foster brother, apparently.

The door to Castiel’s shared bedroom creaks open and light spills briefly across the floor before it’s closed again. Footsteps make the floor groan, and then Castiel’s mattress sags under heavy weight. Warmth surrounds him, and he knows it’s Dean, because it smells like his soap and engine grease.

“Hey,” Dean says, “You didn’t answer any of my texts. You okay?” He circles his arms around Castiel’s waist and kisses along the back of Cas’ neck, but it doesn’t do much to make him feel better.

“Fine,” Castiel says, and leaves it at that.

“But you –” Dean says.

“I’m fine, Dean.”

He may have let his guard down, but maybe it’s not too late to put it back up again.

X

Lethargy rules over Castiel’s day at school the morning following. Meg pretends that he’s fine and Charlie eyes him with concern, but doesn’t press him for information. He appreciates the space, because space is exactly what he needs to get everything built up again. Every I-don’t-give-a-damn attitude that he had about himself and everything around him before Dean Winchester and his stupid water pistol paraded their ways into his life. He wants it all back. The apathy, the iron will. He wants to undo this whole disaster.

But then some soft part of Castiel doesn’t want that at all. If he went back to the person that he used to be, then he wouldn’t have Mama Missouri, either, and even if he wants to shut off every feeling related to Dean, Mama doesn’t deserve the same treatment. She’s been good to him.

He doesn’t want to think too hard about it.

Sometimes school is good for not feeling things. He can focus on busywork and learning things he doesn’t know if he’ll ever use in his adult life.

One class period before lunch, an office assistant drops by with a pink pass for Castiel to visit the dean.

He didn’t do anything, though.

Did he? Castiel tries to think back on any possible in-school transgressions made in the past couple of weeks, and comes up empty.

But when he reaches the dean’s office and sees Charlie waiting with a pink pass and her Iron Man backpack, he knows it’s about GSA. Castiel slouches in the chair beside her and opts not to talk until Pam shows her face in the doorway of her office. She doesn’t look happy, and Ms. Barnes always looks happy – or at least mischievous – so grim feeling curls in Castiel’s gut, dark and cold.

Charlie and Cas sit in the chairs in front of her desk, and Pam sighs as she flops back behind it.

“Principal Milton denied our request for the GSA to be a formal afterschool club.”

The words are out there, just as Castiel feared.
“What?” Charlie says, jerking her spine into a straight position, “On what grounds?”

Ms. Barnes runs a hand back through her hair and says, “Oh, you’ll fucking love this.”

If the dean is swearing in front of her students, it is not going to be pretty, Castiel decides.


“Principal Asshole – excuse me – Milton has informed me that a Gender & Sexualities Alliance is ‘not school appropriate’ and that ‘he can’t just have students flaunt sexuality.’”

“Fucking really?” Castiel says, “Great. That’s cool. Take away the one safe place some kids have in this fucking hellhole. Real classy.”

“Is there anything that we can do about it?” Charlie asks. Dismay reads all over her face, like she can’t believe that something like this could happen. It’s enough to get Castiel to reach over and rub her arm, because okay, if this was only about him, he’d be cool with it. But no, it’s not about him. This is about Charlie, who’s poured every ounce of her time and love into the GSA so there’d be someplace for misfit kids to be themselves, where no one would call them names or treat them as less-than. This is about all the queer kids in school. It’s the one place some students can feel normal, talk about crushes with one another or get inclusive sex education or share their bad days or discuss body dysphoria without fear of retribution.

The fact that somebody wants to take away the smallest thing that they have to themselves makes Castiel rage.

“Oh, we’re doing something about it,” Ms. Barnes says, “Trust me. I am not letting this one slide. Every club but ours got Principal Milton’s stamp of approval, and if that doesn’t say discrimination, then I don’t know what does. I’m going to be looking into where to start tonight after the day’s over, and I promise I’ll keep you updated. I just thought you should know where we stand.”

“Should I tell my parents?” Charlie asks, voice small.

“Yes, please do,” Ms. Barnes says, “We need as many people to know about this as possible. Maybe if we make as much of a fuss as we can, this won’t need to turn into some crazy lawsuit.”

“But it might?” Charlie says, “Become a lawsuit, I mean."

“It could,” Pamela says, “So hang onto your hats and glasses, kids. This is gonna be one hell of a ride.”

Ms. Barnes sends them back to class with the promise that she’s going to stand up to their prick of a principal and to keep their cool in the meantime, since there’s nothing they can do until she turns up the heat. That doesn’t stop Castiel from being righteously pissed for the rest of the day, especially when he gets to see the looks on all the faces of the GSA members when Charlie breaks the news to them.

Some of them are resigned. Like Castiel, they’ve seen enough shit to not want to bother to fight. Others are angry. Some of them cry.

Castiel just stays furious.

He stays furious through lunch period and the rest of his classes and even as the final bell at the end of the day sounds, his insides feel like they’re being licked by flames. He throws his backpack over his shoulders and watches other students pass. He sees a straight couple hand in hand walking
toward the front doors, and all over again, he’s angry, angry, angry.

He knows that Pamela told them to keep their heads down, knows that she said to let her handle everything in the beginning, but he wants to understand. Castiel wants to know what possible motive there could be for this, other than just being a power-hungry, homophobic dickhead.

Castiel marches upstairs, and before he can even figure out what he’s doing, he’s inside the office that the principal and vice principal share.

“I need to speak with Principal Milton,” he says tightly to the secretary up front.

He pushes his glasses up his nose and asks, “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but I need to speak with him,” Castiel replies.

“Sorry, you’ll have to make an appointment,” the secretary says, “I can set one up for you if you’d like –”

“I’ll take him, Bartholomew.”

Principal Milton appears from behind the bespectacled secretary and ushers Castiel forward into his office. He closes the door behind them both, and takes a seat behind his desk, a wide, opulent thing with baroque markings and bowed legs and clawed feet. He taps his fountain pen on the desk and says, “I assume you’re here to dispute my decision about your club, Mr. Novak?”

“No,” Castiel says, “I wanted to ask why you did it.” He folds his arms over his chest and narrows his eyes. He’s not gonna sit down, not for this asshat.

“I believe I made that clear to Ms. Barnes,” Zachariah says, and folds his fingers together, “It’s simply not school appropriate.”

“That’s bullshit,” snaps Castiel, “the GSA is a place for students to go to feel safe. This has nothing to do with ‘school appropriate,’ and you know it. This is about the fact that you can’t handle the idea that there are people that don’t fit into your idea of what love looks like, what gender looks like.”

Principal Milton’s eyes go cold and he says, “Mr. Novak, a public high school is simply not the place for a sex club.”

“It has nothing to do with sex!” roars Castiel, and he bangs his hands down on the desk, “It’s about identity. It’s about being allowed to be who you are without being afraid.”

“I’ve heard enough,” Principal Milton says, “I’ve explained my reasons, and you’re dangerously close to earning yourself a suspension for your behavior, Castiel.”

“Oh, bite me,” Castiel says, and throws open the door to Zachariah’s office.

He storms out and back down the stairs to the bus loop outside, only to realize that in his rage, he missed his bus back home to Sugar Lane. He ends up having to call Mama to come get him. She asks him if he’s okay when he clammers into the front seat of her van. Castiel says that he doesn’t want to talk about it, and they leave it at that.

Then, he gets an idea.

X

Castiel waits patiently. He even does his homework and gets out a sketch of a demon wearing a suit
and sitting behind an ornate desk. He eats dinner that night and discusses his day at school as though nothing out of the ordinary happened. If Mama Missouri finds this suspicious, she doesn’t say as much.

When Dean comes home from work, Castiel follows him into the bathroom in the boys’ home and kisses him. Dean smiles and kisses back, petting a hand through Cas’ dark hair before he asks, “You feelin’ better, then?”

“Not really,” Castiel says. He watches Dean undress, as he strips off his jumpsuit and the trappings underneath and throws them into the wicker laundry hamper just on the inside of the bathroom door.

“What’s going on?” questions Dean. He bends to get the water started, and as Dean holds his fingers under the stream coming from the faucet to test the temperature, Castiel comes up behind him, smoothing a hand over the curve of Dean’s naked ass. Dean looks back to chuckle a little and murmurs, “Feeling frisky, baby?”

Dean switches the water stream to shower and steps over the rim of the tub, pulling the shower curtain closed. Castiel, meanwhile, shuts the toilet lid and slouches back onto it.

“A little frisky,” he smirks at Dean and Dean flips him off. Then he sighs and breaks the news, “So, the new principal denied the GSA’s request to become an official afterschool club.”

Dean eyes him through the curtain and , “What? Why? You got a staff sponsor, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, Ms. Barnes,” Castiel says, “Principal Dickface seems to think that the GSA is not school appropriate. He called it a ‘sex club.’”

“Are you serious?” Dean asks, “What the hell, dude? That’s really fucked up. Can he say that?”

“The second part he just said to me when I went to see him after school,” Castiel explains, “I don’t think anybody would believe me if I told them that’s what happened.”

“So what’s gonna happen?” asks Dean.

“Honestly? I don’t think that there’s anything that we can really do, no matter what Pam says,” he responds, “But I’ve got an idea for a little retribution of our own, and I was hoping that you might be willing to help me out.”

“Dude, of course. Anything,” Dean says.

So Cas tells him what he’s planning to do. He says that Dean isn’t obligated to join him when he does it, because he’s going to do it no matter what anyone tells him. Dean says to that that there’s no way he’s letting Cas handle Principal Dipshit on his own, and that he’s in.

All they have to do now is wait just a little longer.

X

Principal Zachariah Milton arrives at Smoky Bluff High School at exactly five thirty am every morning, even on weekends. He gets out of his Lexus, retrieves a leather briefcase with a gold clasp from the backseat, and walks straight from the upper parking lot to the teacher’s lounge, where he makes himself a pot of coffee, fills a stainless steel travel mug, and returns to the principal’s office, where he locks his door until official school hours begin.

Castiel acquaints himself with this routine, watching from afar. Two days after the incident, Ms.
Barnes still hasn’t gotten back to them about what action they’re supposed to take next, and that’s how he knows that his plan is the only way to go.

Watching Principal Milton makes his blood boil. It makes him angry that a casual, shithead homophobe can attain a job at a public school and that no one blinks an eye when he starts behaving badly. No one cares.

No one but Castiel, and that’s why he has to handle this bullshit by himself.

Well, with Dean. Dean promised to help.

So on Friday morning, they decide to strike. They wake up at four in the morning in their separate bedrooms and dress for a chilly September walk to Smoky Bluff, since the Impala is still in for repairs and they don’t want to involve anyone else in what they have up their sleeve, since the only friends they have that can drive are Charlie and Gabriel, and neither of them deserves whatever shitstorm comes after this.

Dean hooks his arm around Castiel’s waist as they walk toward the school and kisses his lips, his cheeks, his jaw. A thrill runs up Castiel’s spine with the touch, and another thrill sends a shudder through his whole body when Smoky Bluff appears in their line of sight. He and Dean sit near The Shed, in an area just out of sight from the upper lot, but where they can see it plain as day. They split a package of Poptarts while they wait, and share a couple of kisses.

At five twenty eight on Friday morning, Principal Milton’s Lexus pulls into Smoky Bluff’s upper parking lot. By five thirty, he is parked near the front doors and has his briefcase in his hands. By five thirty five, he’s in the teacher’s lounge brewing his coffee, and that’s when Dean and Cas start trudging from The Shed to the parking lot.

They brought the spray paint that Anna used for her Destination Imagination team’s project last year. Castiel personally favors the baby pink, and with a grin he shakes it up, pops off the cap –

And he starts to paint the side of Principal Milton’s pristine Lexus.

Dean takes the hood of the car. Castiel watches with a smile as black spray paint spells out the words MOUNTAIN OF DICKS over that perfect, silver paint. He laughs and Dean gives him a thumbs up before moving to the other side of the car for a little more well-deserved vandalism.

Castiel’s own pink words spell out something less creative, over both the windows and the paint. He knows that they only have a few minutes before Principal Milton will return to his office with coffee, and be able to see the damage done to his car from his office window.

Castiel’s handiwork says in his neat, all-caps writing: I AM A HOMOPHOBIC ASSHOLE.

Dean, on the other hand, writes DELICIOUS, DELICIOUS COCKS on the other side, forgoing the black paint he used for the hood and instead selecting a lime green shade.

“Know what we should do?” Dean says.

“Hm?”

“Make out on top of the car,” he replies.

Castiel laughs and drops the can of paint onto the pavement below. He climbs up onto the roof of the Lexus while Dean pulls himself up, both of them careful not to smear the paint that they’ve applied to it. There, with adrenaline and righteous anger pumping through their veins, their mouth surge
together. It isn’t a gentle or loving kiss. It’s enraged, filled with tongue and clashes of teeth. Dean cups Castiel’s ass and braces them together.

An instant later, he lets go.

“What are you doing?” asks Cas.

“There was something I wanted to do,” Dean says, “Can’t be hard while I do it. Hang on.”

There, in the middle of the high school parking lot, on top of the principal’s car, Dean drops trou, takes his dick in hand, and takes a piss.

Castiel doesn’t realize that their time is up until it’s too late. Shouting sounds from the end of the parking lot, and Principal Milton comes bolting from the front doors, yelling at them. Instead of being scared, Castiel is furious. He lifts the middle finger on each hand and says, “Hope you like art projects, you unbelievable piece of shit.”

“The police are on their way,” Principal Milton warns, “I’ll press charges.”

“I don’t think we give a flying fuck,” Dean bites out beside Castiel. He still hasn’t bothered to pull his pants back up, and instead of doing so now, shakes his pelvis at Zachariah’s stunned face and says, “Kinda weird that you’re not into dick, since you’re such a big bag of cock.”

Cas laughs and kisses Dean again, yanking him close just as they hear the sirens.

He should be afraid, but he isn’t. Castiel just grins and yells, even as flashing blue and red surrounds them on all sides, and uniformed officers demand that Dean and Castiel come down from their perch on the ruined Lexus.

As soon as their feet hit the ground, their hands are wrenched behind their backs and an officer each slaps cuffs around their wrists. Sirens, Zachariah’s yelling, their Miranda rights being recited into their ears – it’s all a blur of noise and light and fury. Castiel doesn’t care, just grins at Dean as they both get pushed into the backs of police cars.

At five fifty seven on Friday morning, Dean and Castiel arrive at the police station.
Going through the motions at the police station is surreal. Castiel and Dean get their photos taken and information logged into a system by separate officers. The watery-eyed man in charge of Castiel looks like he’d be better off in bed with a bowl of chicken soup and a box of Kleenex than being at work, but he doesn’t say as much. It hits him partway through the process that he’s in the trouble of a lifetime. He figures he’s better off calling Victor than Missouri, because he’s embarrassed at this point and would like to put off Mama finding out for as long as he can.

Then it occurs to him.

Castiel could be taken away from Mama for this. They could pull him away from Sugar Lane because it looks like Mama Missouri’s been neglecting his needs and that he acted out.

Oh. Oh, shit. Shit.

“Victor Henriksen,” says the voice on the other lines.

Castiel starts to cry, because it all hits him that fast. The life he’s built here could be over and all because he decided to destroy it himself. He thought he should break all his ties here but now he knows that that’s the worst idea that he’s ever had. He has a place here, people that love him and that he loves back, a luxury that he never found in another foster home. Not even once.

“What did you do?”

“Victor,” Castiel snuffles into the receiver, “It’s me.”

“Castiel?” Victor says, “What’s wrong? Why are you calling me from the police station?”

Of course Victor has the police station’s phone number programmed into his cellphone.

“I did something very stupid,” Castiel finally says. He holds his face in his hands, and ignores the varying looks of pity and disdain from different passing police officers. He pushes his hair back out of his eyes before he goes on, “Well, I got arrested.”

“I gathered that much,” Victor says on a sigh, “Tell me what happened.”

“It seemed like an excellent idea at the time,” Castiel prefaxes.

He can almost see the look of despair on Victor’s face as he says, “It always does.”

“We got this new principal,” Castiel starts, and wets his lips. They’re cracked and dry from licking them so much in the past thirty minutes, and when he starts to peel at the skin with his teeth, he tastes blood. He sniffs again and holds back the oncoming wave of tears with his free fist as he continues, “He’s a total dirtbag, Victor, you have to believe me. All the afterschool clubs had to resubmit the paperwork to be legitimate and find a staff sponsor, and the GSA did all that, right? He denied the GSA because it’s ‘not school appropriate’ or whatever. It’s the only place that some kids have!”

“What did you do?”
“Well, Dean and I…may have spray painted his Lexus,” Castiel says, voice tiny.

“Oh, Jesus, Castiel.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” Castiel says, “What do I do?”

“I don’t know yet,” Victor replies, “I’m gonna go ahead and call Missouri. You just sit tight and let us figure it out. Luckily you and Dean are minors, but this could get ugly. Is there anything else that I should know?”

“Um,” Castiel clears his throat, “Dean kind off…took off his pants. And peed on the car.”

“For God’s sake.”

“And shook his dick at the principal.”

“All right. All right,” Victor exhales again, “I’m on my way. In the meantime, don’t do anything illegal.”

“Right,” Castiel says lamely, “We won’t. I’m sorry, Victor.”

“I know you are,” Victor replies, and the line clicks dead.

An officer escorts Castiel back to a holding cell. He’s relieved to see that he shares it with Dean, who’s stretched out with his hands behind his head, looking altogether unconcerned about what they just did. Castiel wants to be angry, but reminds himself that this entire escapade was his idea, not Dean’s, and he has no right to be pissed off at anybody but himself.

“Hey,” Dean says, smug expression flattening when they lock the cell door behind Cas, “You all right?”

“I fucked up,” Castiel says.

“Dude, it’s fine. We’re underage,” Dean says.

“It isn’t that,” Castiel says, and rakes both his hands back through his hair, pacing the short length of the cell, “Dean, they could take me away for this.”

“What?” Dean is up and beside Castiel in an instant, “They couldn’t. Could they?”

“What we did – it calls into question Mama’s ability to take care of me. I’ve already fucked up enough under her care that it might look like neglect,” Castiel says. All over again, he’s crying. Dean dips forward and wraps his arms around him, but it doesn’t help much. It doesn’t help because he knows that these arms may be gone from him forever, and no one will ever hug him like this again. He says into Dean’s shirt, “I’ve been through so many homes. I know how this works.”

Dean might not know what to say, or maybe he knows that there isn’t anything to be said. He just guides Castiel back to the bench at the far end of the holding cell and rubs his back. Castiel doesn’t dare look up from where they are, even as he hears familiar voices.

“Castiel, sugar.”

_Mama._

He does look up then. The door to the holding cell is open, an officer with keys standing beside it. In the opening is Mama Missouri, with Victor and Bobby and Dean’s caseworker Bela behind her. Cas
rips out of Dean’s arms and throws himself at Missouri. She coils her arms around his back and rocks him like he’s a child, and he doesn’t even care that the whole police station can see this.

“I’m so sorry,” he says, “I didn’t mean to – I wasn’t thinking – please don’t let them take me away.”

This may be the worst moment of his life. Before, Castiel wouldn’t know what to count as that moment. Would it be waking up in an unfamiliar hospital to the face of a nurse? Was it later that day when he met Victor, and when Victor told him that his parents were dead? There are countless incidents within foster families that are easily ugly enough to be in the running for the worst moment of his life.

But no, none of them feel that bad anymore. None of them will ever feel as bad as knowing that he screwed up so wholly and completely, that he screwed up so much that he may be taken away from the only people that he’s ever loved.

No, the worst moment of his life isn’t a moment of revelation, or shock, or hate. It’s knowing that he loved something and that he may never get to have it again.

“We’ll figure it out,” Missouri assures him. She isn’t angry or scolding, and maybe that’s how he knows that everything is so wrong. He should be getting grounded, getting lectured about his stupidity, getting put on dish duty for months. But Mama doesn’t do any of those things. She rubs his back like Dean did, and she says, “I promise you, sweetheart, we will figure this out.”

X

Castiel is expelled from Smoky Bluff.

That much doesn’t surprise him.

Nobody speaks much when Missouri brings them home. Dean and Bela disappear to have a private conversation, probably closer to the lecture that Castiel wishes that he got instead of the stunned, pathetic quiet that greets him. Not even Gabriel jokes or tells him ‘way to go.’ It’s just quiet.

Two days after getting arrested, Victor calls and tells Castiel to pack up his things. He wants to cry as he does, folding clothes and tucking away pictures of him with the friends that he made here, but his eyes are dry and he seems to have cried everything out that he could. He takes down the rainbow flag that he won at the opening GSA event last year. He tucks the angel that Mama Missouri whittled for him and gave to him right when he arrived between a pair of jeans and the Ravenclaw t-shirt that Charlie gave him during his very first birthday party.

It’s surprising how many memories can fit into one duffel bag.

Seeing his wall bare and his dresser drawers empty after all this time makes it feel like somebody opened him up and scraped out all his guts with an ice cream scoop. He’s going to be sick, going to throw up. But he doesn’t, and he wishes that he would. At least if Castiel vomited some of the pressure on his insides could be relieved.

When Gabriel enters the bedroom and sees Castiel at the edge of his mattress, duffel bag packed, zipped, and at his feet, he jerks Cas into a hug.

“Gabe, what –”

“Shut up, kid,” Gabriel says.

So Castiel does, and he hugs his foster brother back. It hurts to realize how much like a real brother
that Gabriel has been to him. He’s an annoying shit and one of the greatest people that Castiel has ever met, and he doesn’t know if he’ll ever get to meet somebody like that again in his life.

Does he even have a future anymore?

He’ll age out of the system now. Statistics say that he will end up homeless, probably drug-addicted and in prison. Right now, all of those things sound okay. Anything is better than this. The person that said it’s better to have loved and lost than not at all clearly never felt anything like this, loving with every fiber of your being and then being ripped away from that love. He feels like his skin is being peeled off, muscles slowly coming apart and everything else just spilling out on the floor, blood and guts and acid, and that there’s nothing he can do about it. Nothing but sweep everything up off of the ground, rearrange it back in his body, and pretend that it doesn’t hurt like hell.

“Kiddo,” Gabriel says, and holds Castiel out at an arm’s length. He reaches over and pushes Cas’ chin up so that their eyes are level with one another, “Kid. Castiel. You know Mama’s not gonna let this fly, right?”

Castiel shakes his head and smiles bitterly, “It doesn’t matter, Gabe. I fucked it all up.”

“Yeah, okay. You fucked up. You fucked up bad,” Gabriel says, “But you listen to me, okay? This isn’t over. We’re not letting you go. Not Mama, and not me, and not Dean, either. They’re gonna have to get through us before they’re allowed to take you away for good.”

“Okay,” Castiel says. He doesn’t believe any of it, no matter how much that he wants to. He knows that Gabriel means well, but there’s nothing he can do. He’s eighteen, unemployed, and just as messed up as Castiel. He can talk about not letting go, but it’s out of his hands. It’s out of Castiel’s hands and Mama’s hands and Dean’s hands, and there’s nothing that they can do about it.

“Castiel,” they hear at the doorway.

It’s Sam, and he looks like he’s about to break. He’s pale and his eyes are shadowed, eyes wide and childlike. He says, “Your caseworker just pulled up front.”

Castiel wishes that he’d listened to Dean all those times that Dean said that they should run away. He thinks about how long ago that they would have had to have done it – before John crashed the Impala and killed the woman in the other car, definitely. They could be on the road, living in the car that they’d seen so much in, where they had their first kiss and their first taste of sex with one another. Sure, they’d be living off of gas station hot dogs and a prayer, but they’d have each other, and Castiel could have left because he wanted to, not because he was being jerked away from everything that he’s come to know as home.

Sam slams into him, then. He’s getting tall now, just another reminder of how long Castiel has lived here, how long he’s thought of this place as his.

“Call me and Dean every day, okay?” Sam says.

“Okay,” agrees Castiel.

As soon as Sam lets go, Castiel reaches down and hauls up his duffel. It’s much heavier than it was when he came here, filled with all of the things that he gathered up at Sugar Lane. Memories and friendships and love and family, all represented in sketchbooks full of angels and keepsakes that he’ll have with him forever.

When he walks out of his bedroom and down the short hall in the boys’ home, it’s the last time that he’ll ever do that. The last time that he’ll ever pass by the homemade trappings that furnish every
home in Mama Missouri’s care.

The least that Castiel can do is walk out with his head held high.

So he does. He levels his chin and walks out the door, where Victor waits outside, leaning on the side of his car. He helps Castiel with his bag, unlocking the trunk and tucking it inside beside his ice scraper and spare tire.

“I’m really sorry, Castiel,” Victor says, and pats his shoulder, “Why don’t you say your goodbyes?”

The first person that he hugs is Mama. She stands with her arms open wide, just as she did when he arrived. Castiel runs into them. He’s taller than her, he realizes. When he arrived, Mama Missouri’s height still dwarfed his. He was still just a kid. Now he’s too old, at least old enough to know better than to do what he did.

Missouri holds him tight against her. At first she doesn’t say anything, and Castiel’s afraid that it’ll stay that way.

So he decides to say something first: “Mama…”

“Yes, sugar?”

“I’m really sorry,” he says, “I wish I could stay with you forever. I wish I never did that. I wish I thought about it before it happened. I was just so angry. I didn’t know what to do.”

“It’s okay,” she says.

“No it isn’t!” he exclaims, and like lightning, he’s crying all over again. Castiel thought that he ran out of tears, but they’re here again, hot and stinging like acid in his eyes. He says, “It’s not okay at all. No one loved me. Nobody cared about me. And then you did, and now I have to leave because I’m a stupid fucking idiot.”

“Castiel James Novak,” Missouri says, and shakes her head, “I will not hear you speak about yourself in that way, do you hear me? You made a bad decision. That much is true. But it ain’t unfixable. Trust me, honey, we are going to fix this one. It’s high time I adopted my son, don’t you think?”

“But,” Castiel says helplessly, “but you can’t now. They’re taking me away.”

“Did you forget everything I’ve said to you or are you really just that dense?” Missouri snips, “I told you. I told you that I would fight for you, and you’re not about to make a liar out of me. You just watch them try and take you away for good. I will tell you, sweetheart, it is not happening.”

Castiel wipes his face with the sleeve of his hoodie – Dean’s hoodie. God, he wants to believe her so badly. He wants to breathe in those words and hold his breath until he dies so they never escape his lungs. No one’s ever fought for him before, not ever. No one’s ever thought that he was worth their time. But Mama Missouri still does, and that means everything, even if it doesn't work out.

“I love you, Mama,” he says, and throws his arms around her neck again.

Mama Missouri strokes over his spine and rocks him like a baby again. She hushes him, and when he pulls back, she wipes the tears off of his face with the edge of her blouse. She squeezes his shoulders and says, “I love you too, baby boy. Don’t you ever forget that, or I will hunt you down and whoop your ass, got it?”
“Got it,” he says, and blinks back another round of weeping.

The rest of his foster siblings hug him goodbye after that, Balthazar and Anna and Hester and even Uriel and Raph, though those last embraces are brief and awkward.

And then there’s Dean. Good, crazy Dean Winchester, the boy that he loves desperately and will never tell. Dean scoops Castiel up into a hug and holds him. The embrace is far more intimate than any of the others that he’s had today. His guts are spilling out into the grass all over again, and he clings to Dean, not ever wanting to let go.

Dean doesn’t say sorry like everyone else does, he just says, “We’ll see you soon, baby, don’t worry.”

Castiel shakes his head and says, “I don’t think that’s true, Dean.”

“Yeah? Well it is,” Dean says, “You think that they can just grab you and pull you wherever they want? Fuck that, you’re ours. You’re mine and you’re Mama’s and Gabe’s and Sam’s. You’re family, and family never gives up on family.” He kisses Castiel, hard. It’s hot and sweet and one of the best kisses that they’ve ever had.

Too bad it’s a goodbye kiss.

Victor clears his throat and places his hand on Castiel’s shoulder.

“Son, we’ve gotta get going,” he says, “I’ve got another appointment after this.”

“Okay,” Castiel says.

When Castiel starts to slide out of Dean’s grip, Dean yanks him back and kisses him again, this one shorter and even fiercer than the last. There’s something off in Dean’s face, something tight and angry. Castiel kisses his cheek and says, “I’ll be all right. See you around.”

“Bye, baby,” Dean gruffly says, and jerks Cas in by the wrist for one last hug. He applies a gentle kiss to the center of Cas’ forehead. This time, when Dean lets go, he doesn’t pull Castiel back. He just frowns and watches as Cas circles Victor’s car and opens the passenger door.

Castiel sits and buckles again, stomach awash with sick, eyes itchy and face tearstained. Victor climbs in on the other side and starts the car, and Castiel waves goodbye to Mama and his foster siblings all standing out on the lawn.

As they roll out, Dean hangs his head and Mama Missouri loops her arm around his broad shoulders. She says something to him, and Dean’s head pops back up. He lurches forward and runs after the car.

Castiel rolls down the window and calls back, “Dean, what are you doing? Go back!”

“Hey, fuck you!” Dean says, and keeps running. He makes it to the back of the car before Victor slows to a stop at the Sugar Lane sign and breathes heavily, “Cas! Cas, listen to me. I love you, okay? We’ll sort this shit out. Just don’t forget, okay? I love you.”

Castiel is so stunned as Victor turns out of the trailer park that he forgets to tell Dean that he loves him too.
The radio in Victor’s car is tuned to some Top 40 station playing an upbeat pop song. Castiel has heard it before but doesn’t know the words. The cheerfulness of the song in this moment makes his stomach sour, makes him want to roll down the window and vomit over the edge of it. Instead he scowls at his pale, bloodshot-eyed reflection in the window glass and watches Sugar Lane shrink and shrink and shrink behind him. He doesn’t pay attention to where they’re going, just watches intersections and strip malls flick by.

He feels numb.

“I’m sorry that this is the way that things had to happen, Castiel,” Victor says, his frown tight on his face and his eyes still trained on the road, “but Missouri’s not letting you leave without a fight, so that’s good.”

“Then why’d you take me away in the first place?” Castiel snaps.

“Because it’s my job to assess a situation and determine if a kid is all right in it,” Victor says, “I know you’re not acting out of spite. Hell, I know you don’t think this shit through. It makes Missouri look like she’s not doing her job if you keep getting into fucking shenanigans left and right, and it makes me look like I’m not doing my job if I just let the shit fly.” He seems unperturbed by the situation, and it does nothing but piss Castiel off even more. It isn’t fair. None of this is fair.

“Dean got to stay,” he settles on muttering, and folds his arms over his chest. He sinks deeper into the seat.

“And Dean is Bela’s responsibility, not mine,” Victor replies, “Besides, he’s been in the system for what? A couple of weeks? You’ve been at Missouri’s house for over two years and you screwed up one too many times. And that’s fine, but I still gotta do my job.”

Then, apparently, the peppy string of music starts to annoy Victor too, because he switches from the radio to whatever disc is in the car stereo. Fluid piano music rolls out of the speakers, though the tune is still not melancholy enough to suit the occasion. Castiel keeps staring out the window and wonders briefly if he would die if he opened the car door and flung himself out of it.

He glances at the speedometer behind the steering wheel in Victor’s grip. They’re only going forty five miles per hour. Jumping out of the car probably wouldn’t kill him, then.

Pity.

“You’re an asshole,” Castiel informs him.

Victor blinks over and cocks one brow at him as they slow to a stop at a red light. He says, “Well, you’re entitled to your opinion, but I’m gonna disagree. I’m just doing my job. You’re the one that vandalized your principal’s car and got arrested, Castiel.”

There isn’t much that he can say to refute that. What happened was stupid. It also seems stupid to think to himself that he meant well – because how could he mean well with spray paint in his hand and his boyfriend’s dick out in the open? But he did mean well. He wanted to take a stand, wanted to
show Principal Shitface that queer kids matter and that they’re there, that they have a voice and that they’ll use it.

That his good intentions manifested in the worst way possible isn’t in the least surprising.

Victor steers them out of Lawrence and they travel south. It doesn’t take long for Castiel to realize where they’re headed. He’s stayed there in between homes multiple times before, and here he is again. It’s a boys’ home, a small, neat farmhouse that lies on the edge of Baldwin City, Kansas. He doesn’t mind it, though the proprietors run a debatably tighter ship than even Mama Missouri.

Sonny’s Home for Boys.

It looks about the same as it did when Castiel left it: A white and light blue farmhouse with wide, open front porch and a barn alongside it, and huge trees ringing the entire property. The first time that Castiel saw this house he thought it looked nice, but now all he can see is the peeling paintjob and neglected shingles, and wishes for his home back at Sugar Lane Mobile Home Community.

Last time he stayed at Sonny’s was just before Victor came to take him to live with Missouri. And Missouri was the last resort for Castiel, the final frontier. When Victor parks, he sees some younger boys playing outside with action figures in the grass and sighs. This is where he’ll live until he turns eighteen, he guesses. No one’s gonna want him now.

Then again, he’s not sure he wants anybody to want him, considering how well went for him with everybody in Lawrence.

“All right, you need me to walk you to the door?” asks Victor, “I gave Sonny a call and let him know that you’d be staying here again.”

Castiel shakes his head and says, “Just open the trunk.”

He does, and Castiel unbuckles himself and gathers his things. He slings the duffel over his shoulder. It’s only a few pounds heavier than it was when he hefted it into the trunk at fourteen and prepared for a new foster family, the weight of the memories of Sugar Lane and his own stupidity are enough to make him feel like Sisyphus.

Ruth answers the front door when he knocks. She frowns.

“Didn’t think I was going to see you again,” she says.

“I didn’t either,” he mutters, and tries not to feel like infinite shit as he does. He doesn’t wait for her to show her where he’ll be sleeping. He knows where the communal bedroom is, and it’s easy enough to figure out which beds are occupied and which ones aren’t.

It’s cold and dull in the room, even with the colorful quits and bedding on the beds that line either side of the wide room. He didn’t think he was ever going to see this bedroom again, and his heart sinks ever deeper into his gut, burning like it’s dissolving in his stomach acid. He lets his duffel down on the floor with a thump beside a bed at the end of the room and flops over onto the narrow mattress.

Empty and exhausted, he closes his eyes and prays for sleep.

X

Sonny’s place isn’t terrible, but it’s nowhere near the home that Missouri created for him. Castiel tries to make it better, shape his new life here into something that resembles what he had. He situates the
angel that Missouri carved for him on the left bedpost of his headboard and tacks up his rainbow flag on the wall above it. The pictures he has of himself with Dean and his friends from Smoky Bluff he saves, tucking them into the inside cover of his sketchbook to keep them safe and private.

The other boys seem to avoid him. That suits Castiel just fine. He doesn’t feel like talking to anybody, doesn’t feel like growing roots when he’ll be yanked up out of the ground and planted someplace else where he’ll belong even less than he belonged in the place before.

He resumes school at a high school nearby, the one he might have attended for his freshman year if Victor had not had Missouri agree to take Castiel in. He doesn’t like it there. It’s smaller than Smoky Bluff, and everyone seems to be in everybody’s business. He fixes the issue of perhaps being spoken to by eating his lunch in the downstairs boys’ bathroom in a stall by himself.

For the first week, Castiel siphons whiskey from Sonny’s liquor stash in the cabinet above the fridge, tucking it into opaque water bottles and tipping it back in between classes and at lunchtime to get him through the day. It doesn’t do much but numb him, but numb is good.

After the first week, Sonny treads into the bedroom with his home phone and says, “Got a Dean on the line for you.”

Castiel frowns at the phone but takes it with a soft, “Thank you,” before he answers, “Hello, Dean.”

“Hey,” Dean says, “How’s everything going?”

“Like shit, but I’ll manage,” Castiel answers. There’s a long silence between them, and he realizes that maybe he should be worried about Dean like Dean is worried about him. Jesus Christ, he’s a shit boyfriend. He coughs and rubs his forehead before he says, “What about you? How are you holding up?”

“ kinda shit here too,” Dean says, “but whatever. I miss you. It seems quiet around here without you. Everyone’s got sticks up their asses and it’s like we’re walking on eggshells. Mama seems calm but I think she’s pretty messed up over you being gone. Anyway, I called for a couple reasons.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “Mama thought I should tell you about everything that’s going on. She’s got like a lawyer and shit? Anyway, there’s gonna be an adversary hearing to get you back, and then she’s gonna adopt you and everything. The lawyer seems to think that it’ll go over smooth as hell, even with everything going on.”

“…Really?”

“Really, man,” Dean says. He clears his throat and then starts speaking more softly, “Baby. I was thinking I might have Charlie drive me down there on Saturday. Bobby gave me the afternoon off. Are you gonna be free?”

“Oh,” Castiel says. He doesn’t know why it surprises him that Dean still wants to see him. He’d love to see Dean, to have a reprieve from how crappy he’s been feeling. He’d love to see a familiar face, and his heart swells up with feeling.

“What? Is that not cool with you? It’s okay if you got plans. I just – wanted to see you.”

“No, no, nothing like that,” Castiel rushes to say, “Yes. Yes is what I meant to say. I’d really like it if you visited me.”
“Awesome,” Dean says. Castiel can hear his smile. He goes on, “All right. Cool. See you, then. You want me to hand you to Mama?”

“I guess so,” Castiel says.

A second later, Missouri’s voice floods the line. She greets, “Hey sweetheart. Dean tell you all about what we got goin’ on?”

“Yes,” he answers tentatively, “Are you…are you really going to adopt me?”

“Of course I am,” she says, indignant, “You’re my son, ain’t you?”

Castiel’s throat clogs up and his eyes start to sear again. He nods before he realizes that Mama can’t see him, that he’s talking to her on a phone feeling displaced and lonely and shitty. After too long, he finally manages to squeeze out, “Yes I am.”

The phone call with Dean and Mama Missouri combined with the prospect of Dean’s visit on Saturday puts a renewed skip in Castiel’s step. He even hangs out with some of the other boys at Sonny’s and agrees to a match of Magic: The Gathering, which he wins by a landslide, courtesy of the games he’d played with Charlie (whom he has beaten a grand total of twice). He still avoids human interaction at school, but has to stop bringing liquor when Sonny catches him mid-whiskey-tip into his to-go cup.

For that infraction he gets an interesting list of chores and a sore ego, but nothing more or less than Mama Missouri would have given him back home.

Shit.

He thinks of Lawrence and Sugar Lane and Mama as home, and there’s nothing that he can do about that. He thinks of his bedroom that he shares with his brothers and knows that he truly does think of Gabriel and Andy and Balthazar and even Raph and Uriel as his brothers. Anna and Hester are his sisters. Missouri is his mother.

And he’s here, with Sonny, and some strange kids, daydreaming about the place he thinks of as home.

He daydreams of Dean and Sam, of drinking lukewarm beer by the creek and roughhousing in the dirt, of parking the Impala behind an abandoned building and kissing Dean until his jaw hurts. There are so many things that he already misses, and he hasn’t even been gone long enough to truly yearn.

It turns out that he doesn’t have to wait for long for a taste of home to find him.

On Wednesday, when Castiel dismounts from the school bus and walks the short distance back to Sonny’s farmhouse, he finds a visitor with his back against the headboard of Castiel’s bed, knees curled in tight to his chin.

“Sam?” Castiel says, brows crunching together. He dumps his backpack at the door and sweeps forward. It’s only just after school and it takes at least thirty minutes to get to Sonny’s from Lawrence, if not longer with traffic. He sits down on the sagging mattress and touches Sam’s leg through his jeans to get his attention, “Are you okay? How’d you get here?”

“Skipped class and took a bus,” Sam says. His voice sounds scratchy like he’s been crying, but Castiel can’t get a good enough look at his eyes to confirm whether or not that’s the case.
“Why?” Castiel asks.

“Can’t I just wanna see you?” Sam snaps.

Castiel actually flinches at the sharpness of Sam’s voice. He can feel himself frown more as he carefully states, “There’s something wrong.”

Sam doesn’t confirm or deny this.

“Is it Dean?”

“No,” Sam says. His voice cracks and he presses his face closer into his legs, all awkward limbs now that he’s hit his growth spurt. But before Castiel can dive back into his line of questioning, Sam mumbles something into his legs.

“I can’t hear you like that,” Castiel says.

“I said that it’s a problem with me,” Sam bites out. Castiel tries not let his heart sink at the fury in Sam’s voice and keeps quiet, waiting for him to elaborate. A sheen of sweat coats Sam’s forehead underneath the sweep of his hair in his eyes, and he looks pallid, like he hasn’t slept in far too long. Cas wants to remark on all of these things, wants to ask what in the hell has happened to turn sweet, sometimes-irritating-little-brother, smartass Sam Winchester into a perspiring wreck of prepubescent human. He doesn’t, though.

“Cas,” Sam hoarsely says, and though he doesn’t untangle himself from his limbs he does lift his eyes just a little, “Cas, I did something dumb.”

“Yes, I did too, that’s why I’m here and not at home with Mama where I’m supposed to be,” Castiel says.

“No,” Sam says, “No, I mean that I did something really, really dumb.”

Castiel draws a blank when he tries to think of something worse that vandalizing the Lexus that belongs to the principal of your high school.

Sam shifts a little, lowering his knees. He scoots forward like they’re playing a game of Telephone and that he’s about to whisper in Castiel’s ear. With delicate fingers, he rolls up the sleeve of his hoodie. His face is stretched taught with something between shame and fear. Just as the cuff makes it past the bend of Sam’s elbow, he thrusts in in front of Castiel’s face.

There, at the delicate skin at the crook of his arm are four dark puncture wounds, the marks bleeding into irritated veins. The skin that surrounds it is pink and red and bruised in some places. It’s ugly, and Castiel recognizes exactly what the markings mean from the time he spent with other homeless kids beneath the underpass. He’s seen too many track marks to mistake them for anything else.

“Oh, Sam,” Castiel can only manage. He fumbles for what to do for several seconds and then heaves Sam into a tight hug. He rubs Sam’s back and Sam shudders out panicked, heavy breaths against his shoulder.

When they finally pull apart, Sam rolls his sleeve back down over his arm and says, “It was…I didn’t…”

“It’s okay,” Castiel says, “You can tell me.” He wants to know. He wants to know how something like this could happen to Sam, of all people.
Sam nods and goes on, “It started after dad’s crash.”

So this is a recent development.

“I was freaking out,” he says, “and I was hanging out with Ruby and God, fuck, this is so stupid. I was complaining about my dad and Dean and she’s just all like, ‘I have something that’ll cheer you up.’ And it’s something in a needle, and I knew it was dumb but I just wanted everything to stop and now I get these cravings, like I have to have more or I have to scratch my eyes out or I’ll die. What do I do?”

Castiel is the worst person to come to for advice. He always fucks things up astronomically when trying to make them good and better, and he doesn’t understand what he could possibly have of value to say to Sam Winchester on drug addiction.

“You might want to start by telling somebody,” Castiel suggests, tentative.

“That’s what I’m doing,” Sam replies, frustrated.

“I mean, tell Dean or Mama,” Castiel says.

“Why?” Sam asks, “They’d just get angry at me. Shit. Are you angry at me?”

“No, of course not,” Castiel says. Just worried. Really, really worried. His brain is pumping out thoughts so quickly that his gut starts to churn. How many times has Sam done this? Should he tell somebody for Sam? Who do you even go to for help about this?

“I don’t want to tell Dean,” Sam says firmly.

“I’m not the best person to come to for advice,” Castiel finally says.

“But you,” Sam starts. His face crumples, and he tries again, “But you always know what to do.”

“Sam, I –” Castiel’s lips part and he starts to say ‘mess everything up,’ but something makes him stop. Instead he shifts and places a hand on Sam’s knobbly shoulder, “I don’t always know what to do. Most of the time it seems like I never know what to do. But I…I’ll be here, okay? If anything, I still think you should tell Dean.”

“You’re not going to tell him, are you?” Sam demands, “Don’t tell Dean. Just, whatever you do, don’t.”

Castiel is tempted, to be fair. But he shakes his head and replies, “No. I won’t. But I think you should.”

“I’ll think about,” Sam mutters.

“Okay,” Castiel concedes. He figures that this is the best that he’s going to get.

“Can I stay here for a little longer?” asks Sam.

“Of course,” says Castiel, “Just call Mama. I’ll ask Sonny if he can give you a ride later tonight. It’s spaghetti night for dinner.”

An expression of blatant relief replaces the raw panic written on Sam’s face before. He looks like he might lean over and hug Castiel again, but instead he pulls his limbs back into himself and holds those. A wry little half-smile perks up one side of his mouth and he roughly says, “Thanks, Cas.”
Guilt tugs at Castiel when Sam leaves. The feeling continues throughout the rest of the week, beginning just as angry pinpricks at the base of his skull and inside his stomach, until Saturday when Dean arrives, and his whole body blares with pain and frustration. The track marks on Sam’s arm are a confession just on the tip of his tongue when Dean and Charlie arrive at his doorstep.

But, true to his word, he doesn’t say anything about Sam or Ruby, or the way that Sam has been coping with the non-stop bullshit that has been thrown the Winchesters’ way.

Seeing his friends again is a reprieve from the miasma of ugly feelings that follows him here. He hugs them both and even smiles, and gets to kiss Dean a little when Charlie excuses herself to go to the bathroom. If Cas were a man dying of thirst in a desert, then Dean’s lips are water, and he can’t get enough. He slides into Dean’s lap out of habit and curls his arms around his neck.

He wishes Dean lived just across the hall like he does at home, or even that John was out of prison and Dean still lived just across the trailer park. A half hour isn’t too much time, but Castiel doesn’t even have a learner’s permit, and Dean doesn’t have a car to drive down here.

“Ahem.”

Castiel rolls back away from Dean and sees Charlie back at the doorway. She gives him a look of sympathy.

“Dean, we gotta get going,” Charlie says, “I told my mom I would be back for dinner. My aunt’s visiting from Denver and we’re all supposed to be there and stuff.”

Dread fills Castiel at the prospect of Dean having to leave, of being left alone in this place again. He knows Sonny tries to make it feel like a home. He does a good job for the other boys, and he’s a good man. But this will never be Castiel’s home, because Castiel’s home is with Dean and Sam and Missouri and Gabriel, in Lawrence at Sugar Lane. Not Sonny’s Home For Boys, no matter how many times he’s lived here in between foster homes. It will never be where he belongs.

“Damn it,” Dean grumbles, “Don’t wanna leave you,” he squeezes Cas’ arm.

“I don’t want you to leave either,” Cas laments.

“I’m sorry, you guys,” Charlie says, and scuffs her foot against the worn floorboards as though her aunt’s visit is her fault.

“Oh, don’t all stand there lookin’ like kicked puppies,” – Sonny appears behind Charlie and says, “If you want your young man to stay a while longer, we can arrange that. I can give him a ride back to Missouri’s place if that’s what he needs. Son, you Sam’s brother?”

A look of surprise flickers across Dean’s face, but he still answers, “Yeah, I am.”

“Cool. I liked that boy,” Sonny nods, “Came down and visited Castiel a couple a’ days ago.”

Dean glances at Cas in a way that says you’re going to explain that to me, since Castiel said nothing at all about getting a visit from Sam, and evidently, Sam said nothing to Dean, either. Castiel sucks on his tongue and tries not to worry over Sam staying quiet about what’s going on. And even if Dean interrogates him, he’s not going to betray Sam’s trust.

At Sonny’s offer, the mood in the room lightens. Charlie only stays for a few more minutes, and when she has to leave, Castiel hugs her tightly to his chest on the front porch. She smells like peach
shampoo and for some reason that makes his chest ache.

“I have some news,” Charlie says when he finally lets her go. “The GSA is an official club again. After the stunt you and Dean pulled made the news a bunch of angry parents called and petitioned on our behalf. How crazy is that?”

“Wow,” Cas says, and laughs a little, “I’ll miss you guys.”

“We miss you too,” Charlie tells him, and throws in a second hug for good measure.

As soon as the Bradbury minivan disappears out of sight, Castiel feels Dean’s breath, hot and damp, on the back of his neck. His lips trace over Castiel’s skin there, and his hand slips up under his t-shirt, tips of his fingers barely stroking over Cas’ belly in small circles that turn Cas on more than they soothe him.

“Got anywhere private ‘round here?” Dean murmurs, voice husky against the shell of Cas’ ear.

Castiel swallows to wet his dry throat and nods, “Um, y-yes. The hayloft. In the barn.” It’s not the most comfortable location, but he knows one of the other boys keeps a blanket up there for times when he and his girlfriend want to get frisky in relative seclusion.

Dean’s hand closes around his wrist and they start to run, jogging from the front porch to the mostly-empty barn, where it’s dark and crowded with rusty old farm equipment. They tiptoe around, and Dean has to use the flashlight on his cellphone so that they can see.

As soon as they climb up the ladder and land in the hayloft, Dean tackles Cas. They yank at each other in a frenzy, kissing with rough tongues and teeth and fingernails sinking into skin. Dean’s hands roam down and he cups Cas’ cock through his jeans, stroking over with the heel of his palm. Cas throws back his head and gasps out a moan.

Shit, he didn’t realize how much that he needed Dean.

Hastily, he retreats to where the worn out fleece blanket is folded behind a bale of hay. He lays it out across a flat-ish part of the loft floor and tries to smooth out a wrinkle – only to be tackled all over again. Dean’s weight on top of him feels so right, and just like what he needed.

Then Dean draws back and brings the moment crashing back to reality with the question, “What was Sammy doing here?”

Cas rubs a hand over his face. When Sonny said the word about Sam being over for dinner, he knew he’d have to come up with an excuse. Lamely, he says, “I think he was lonely. I don’t know, Dean. Have you been working lately? Heard from your dad? Could be any reason he showed up.”

“Son of a bitch,” Dean swears. He runs both hands back through his hair and blows all the air out of his lungs before answering, “We visited our dad on Tuesday. Missouri drove us up to the prison and we sat with him for a couple of hours.”

“Did Sam not take it well?” asks Castiel, relieved he has something to cover for Sam.

“No. Well. Actually, yeah. He took it surprisingly well,” Dean says, and frowns, “Took it better than me. God, I’m so pissed at him. You know he’s found God up behind bars or whatever? What the fuck kind of bullshit is that? Couldn’t have found God when we needed him, but now he’s all full of it. Fuck.”

Castiel reaches out to rub Dean’s shoulder.
Dean ends up taking this as an invitation and yanks Castiel forward with the full force of his strength. They’re kissing again, as heated as before but ten times as furious. He can feel the anger in every muscle of Dean’s body, tension quivering like an arrow strung tight before release. He tears Cas’ shirt off and seals his lips over a nipple.

Cas whimpers.

“Fuck,” Dean says, “Fuck, you sound so sexy. God, I wanna be inside you. Can we do that?”

Castiel nods. With his consent hanging between them, their clothes vanish faster than they ever have before, landing haphazardly around the hayloft, draped over bales of hay or crumpled at the edge of the space. The night air that hits him when Dean tugs off his boxers is a little cold. When he whines in complaint, Dean covers Castiel’s body with his own. He gives off heat like a radiator. Each touch of his mouth to Cas’ skin turns up the temperature between them. A bead of sweat trickles between Cas’ shoulder blades and lands on the blanket beneath him.

Dean pulls back and fumbles with his jeans where they landed not far from Castiel’s head. He dumps out a bottle of lube and a couple of condoms, lifting his brows like he’s asking permission again. Castiel nods in return, just in case.

“Hah – fuck, cold,” Cas says, when slippery fingers press between his spread legs, inside him. Dean isn’t gentle tonight. He works Castiel open hard and fast, letting it sting and burn. Cas relishes that pain. It’s a good pain, and seeing the flushed look of lust and anger on Dean’s face makes it all worth it.

Dean rips open a condom packet and gets it on with a little swearing and frustration. When he starts pressing inside Castiel, Cas closes his eyes and groans, taking in every inch of Dean’s length. It’s perfect, just what he needed to remind himself that Dean is here, Dean is his, Dean loves him and he loves Dean.

“Love you,” Castiel manages when Dean bottoms out.

Dean blinks at him at for the first time since they climbed into the hayloft, smiles. He pulls out halfway and fucks back into Cas full force before he grunts out a, “Love you, too.”

The smile disappears quick as whip and Dean holds Castiel’s legs open so he can drive into him harder. He’s still angry, so angry. Castiel moans and holds him and does all he can to ease Dean’s mood, pressing kisses to him between thrusts and pushing back to meet each slam of Dean’s body into his. It’s rough and furious – Castiel scratches marks onto Dean’s freckled back, Dean bites a bruise onto his throat. They both groan and tear at each other.

Dean comes when Castiel sinks his teeth into the meat of his shoulder. His whole body shudders, but he doesn’t pause a second before pulling out of Castiel and reaching for his erection. It takes only a few strokes before Castiel arches his back and comes too, white and hot in a mess all over his abdomen.

“Man, I’m so pissed at my dad,” Dean says, chest still rising and falling from the exertion.

“That’s great, Dean. Just what I wanted to hear after being fucked into a hayloft,” Castiel snips. He doesn’t know why he’s angry. Or maybe he does. He doesn’t like hearing about John, doesn’t actually care about the visit between John and his sons. John has always been a righteous asshole, and the fact that Dean’s attention has always been so firmly on his dad when it’s needed elsewhere makes his blood simmer inside his veins.
Dean shoots a glare over at him, “Dude, fuck you. I’m pissed off and I’m looking for a little fucking sympathy.”

“Oh, gee. Sorry I didn’t notice how difficult your life is,” Castiel bites back, “I’ve only been uprooted and taken away from everything I love. Don’t you worry about me.”

“Not everything is about you, Cas!” Dean shouts. He starts searching for his clothes in the mess that they’ve made.

Castiel hastens to do the same, and shoots back, “Yeah, well today is. You came to visit me. You didn’t come here to visit your stupid fucking dad. You came here for me. Or am I mistaken?”

“Don’t call my dad stupid,” Dean says, eyes darkening, “You don’t have any right to call him that.”

“Yeah? Because I’m pretty sure I do,” Castiel argues back, “He’s all you care about. You’re obsessed. You don’t give a shit about you brother. For God’s sake, Dean, you didn’t even know that Sam had come to visit, and if you’d been paying one modicum of attention to anything but yourself or your crappy father you’d have noticed he was missing on Wednesday. Or are you blind?”

“Hey!” Dean bares his teeth as he bellows, “I care about lots of things, okay, asshat? Dad’s just going through a lot, and he needs me, and he’s not crappy, so shut your stupid mouth.”

Bile rises up in Castiel’s throat. Anger makes him flush. He doesn’t care as much about being referred to as stupid by his boyfriend as he does Dean’s zombie-like devotion to his convict, manslaughtering father.

He can’t do this.

“I can’t do this,” Castiel says.

“What?”

“I said I can’t do this,” Castiel reiterates, “I need somebody right now, and you’re not that somebody. Because you need to help your dad.”

It all sounds logical, now.

“What are you saying, Cas?” Dean is back to being quiet, but the tension hasn’t drained away from his shoulders.

“I’m saying that your attention needs to be on your dad. You need to help him, and you can’t balance that with being with me,” Castiel curses the way that his voice wobbles. He never thought that he would do this, that he would mean the words that he’s saying. He lifts his chin, swallows the painful lump in his throat, and says, “I think we need to call it quits for now.”

“You – you’re dumping me?” Dean’s voice cracks.

“You’re dumping me?” Castiel says, and sounds panicked. It hurts Castiel’s heart to hear that in his voice, but he knows this is the logical move. The way that it has to be. Dean pulls Castiel forward into a kiss, but it’s empty, a scared touch of their lips and Dean’s tongue trying to force its way into Castiel’s mouth when it shouldn’t be there anymore. Dean pulls back and says, “Baby,
please. Don’t do this.”

Castiel shakes his head and says, “I’m sorry, Dean. It’s over.”
I Know I Shouldn't

Chapter Notes

There is a lot of use of drugs and alcohol in this chapter, fyi.

A sidenote, I am not going to draw this out too long. It'll be better soon! The story is almost done.

Chapter Track: Terrible Things – Brick+Mortar

I Know I Shouldn't

Only four days after his split with Dean, Castiel gets in trouble again. He knows he shouldn’t, knows that he should just ignore everything and let it roll like water off a duck’s back. He’s already skating on thin ice as it is; any more trouble with the law and he’ll get more than court-ordered counseling and a stack of community service hours that may never end.

But the guy was a douchebag, and Castiel could only take so many minutes of being seated next to some incredible homophobe in physics class before aforementioned homophobe warranted a punch in the face.

It turns out that punching your classmate in the face without warning lands you in your new dean’s office with the paperwork for an out-of-school suspension in his hands while he waits for Sonny to come collect him, and prepares for some kind of visit from Victor and the lecture of a lifetime. He slouches in the chair and throws his head back. For a moment, he desperately wishes to be back at Sugar Lane, knowing a fiasco like this could be solved with stolen whiskey by the creek with Sam and Dean.

Then he realizes he no longer has Sam and Dean, and his mood darkens.

Sonny shows at the office around forty five minutes after he’s been called, sweating and smelling of hay. It’s clear that Castiel interrupted some kind of work around the farm. He feels a little guilty, because Sonny doesn’t deserve his bullshit any more than Mama Missouri or his friends back at home deserved it.

“C’mon, boy, time to go home,” Sonny says. Castiel wants to bite out a retort that the farmhouse will never be his home and that his home is thirty minutes north in Lawrence, but Sonny didn’t do anything to ask for his wrath. Instead, he nods sullenly and follows Sonny out of the office and to the high school parking lot, where the truck sits at the back of the lot.

Sonny plays a classic rock radio station on the way back to the farmhouse and sings along to the words, the way that Dean would. It makes his chest ache, heart throbbing under his ribcage. He tries to remind himself that he chose to let Dean go, because Dean needed to be let go. But still, he thinks about how he needs Dean and how Dean couldn’t give him what he needed last time they saw each other.

It feels like weeks instead of a mere four days since he last saw Dean’s face, kissed his lips and held him in his arms.
“This about that Dean kid?” asks Sonny.

Castiel glances over at Sonny, folds his arms, and decides not to talk. He doesn’t want to say anything that he’ll regret.

“That’s fine,” says Sonny, “You don’t have to talk to me if you don’t want to, but you gotta know I ain’t stupid. You and Dean sit in my house for hours making cow eyes at each other, then you disappear for an hour, come back not talking and smelling like sin.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Castiel says, and sinks down further in the seat. He looks pointedly out of the truck window instead of at Sonny, and scowls.

“All right by me if you don’t wanna talk,” Sonny says, “But you’re in my truck and my custody so you’re at least gonna listen to me. I’ve been led to believe that that boy was not only your boyfriend, but your best friend. That the bracelet you wear is on him too. If that’s the way it is, whatever bad blood you got goin’ on between you, you gotta know it ain’t near as important as the way you feel about each other.”

Castiel just says, “Please do not make this feel worse than it already does.”

“Okay, okay,” Sonny says, and holds up his hands in defense for a brief second before he replaces them on the steering wheel, “All I’m saying, son, is that we got very few people in our lives worth hangin’ onto. Don’t let you best friend go ‘cause of one dumb fight.”

Castiel knows that Sonny is right. The fact of the matter is that he never intended to let Dean go, never meant to let it be done forever. This is just supposed to be temporary, only as long as Dean needs to figure out whatever bullshit is going on between him and his dad. Just because Castiel doesn’t know how long that will take doesn’t mean that this separation is endless. He’s not shoving Dean out of his life for good…just for the time being.

And for the time being, that’s just how it’s going to be.

Sonny pulls the truck around to the back of the farmhouse and they both climb out without bothering to speak to one another. Castiel gets the feeling that his talking-to was their brief conversation in the car, and that conversation is both much worse than he feared and better than he expected. Sonny may not have given him any extra chores for his transgression, but now Cas gets to wallow in thoughts of his best friend-slash-boyfriend and how they’re not speaking at all right now.

Sonny makes him wonder if what he did was the right thing to do.

Of course it was.

Wasn’t it?

Castiel leaves the suspension paperwork on the kitchen table for Sonny to sign and treads upstairs to the bedroom. Everyone else is still in school, and so it’s blissfully empty. He dumps his backpack on the floor beside his bed and flops back onto the mattress, extracting his sketchbook out from where he hides it beneath some of his other things.

The pictures tucked in the front cover all fall out over Cas’ chest. With a sigh, he picks them up, stacking them back into a neat pile.

The top picture is one of the first pictures ever taken of him and Dean together. He’s fourteen, arm in arm with both Dean and Sam, squinting against the summer sun. Mama took the picture even though Castiel didn’t think it necessary. He didn’t have pictures of himself then, didn’t want the memories
and pain that came with having to remember a certain place at a certain time with certain people, knowing all those things were fleeting and he’d be gone soon.

Turns out his fourteen year old self had been right to worry about having his picture taken with the Winchester brothers.

Because now he’s sitting in a bed in an empty room at a boys’ home, alone. He has no one to blame for the black hole pit in his stomach but himself, no one to talk to about it but his sketchbook. The smiling faces of the Winchesters and himself stare up at him from the shiny photo paper in his grip.

Castiel squints at the picture and can’t help but wonder if he’s made another terrible mistake.

X

He drifts through his suspension in relative solitude, escaping Sonny and the other boys and holing himself up the barn, where he could be alone. He draws demons battling angels, and never knows which of his monsters he wants to win. He gets calls from friends back home but never answers, always making Sonny say to them that Castiel isn’t available or that he’s busy doing something else, or sometimes just the truth, which is that he doesn’t feel like speaking to anyone from back home.

He lets this continue through to the weekend and would have carried on in peace, if on Saturday that peace wasn’t disturbed. Castiel is listening to music and staring at the ceiling when they come. He doesn’t notice he has company until his headphones are ripped from his ears unceremoniously.

“Hey, what the hell –”

Castiel sits up, expecting to see one of the other boys. Instead, above him stand Gabriel and Kali, both of them frowning. Kali looks genuinely annoyed – he can never tell if it’s because of him or because that’s just how she looks. Whatever the case, he comforts himself that she tolerates Gabe on behalf of all of them.

“What are you two doing here?” he asks and frowns.

“What do you think, kid?” Gabriel asks, “You haven’t spoken to anyone for days. We’re worried about you.”

“Well stop being worried,” Castiel says, and rolls over onto his side so he doesn’t have to look at them, “I’m fine.”

“I don’t know what the hell happened between you and Dean, but this bullshit needs to come to an end,” Gabriel responds, “Me and Kali are taking you out, and you’re going to enjoy it, because I said you will. You got me?”

Castiel glowers over his shoulder and says, “I appreciate the thought, but I am not interested.”

“That’s cute,” Gabriel says, and tugs Castiel up into a sitting position, “and your objection is overruled.”

Castiel pulls himself out of Gabriel’s grip and scowls. He knows that once Gabe has made up his mind about something that there’s little to do to dissuade him. And fine, maybe he could use a night out to get his mind off of the never-ending lineup of bullshit that is his life. Castiel runs his fingers through his hair, blows all the air out of his lungs, and asks, “Where are you attempting to drag me?”

“House party,” Gabriel says, “Kali’s ex Baldur has his folks out of town and one hell of a liquor cabinet.”
Liquor. Liquor is good. He can throw back some drinks and forget that any of this is happening. He eyes both Gabriel and Kali, both of whom are dressed to go out. Kali has a sequined, red mini dress stretched over her curves, a stark contrast to the look of disdain on her face. Gabe looks mostly like himself – jeans, shirt untucked and sleeves rolled to his elbows, but he’s done something to his hair so that it’s more artfully arranged, and has a hint of eyeliner around his eyes.

“Okay,” Castiel reluctantly says, “Fine. All right. I’ll go with you. Just let me change.”

He may or may not have been wearing the same shirt and pajama pants for the past three days, half out of laziness and half out of the funk of depression wrapped up all around him. He swaps the clothes for some jeans and a t-shirt and runs a comb through his hair, just enough to get the snarls out of the back of it.

“And where are you goin’?” Sonny asks, when the three of them reach the bottom of the stairs.

“Out,” Castiel says simply, “With my…brother.”

Gabriel’s lips quirk up on one side at this declaration. Cas pretends not to notice.

“All right,” Sonny says, sounding unconvinced, “Don’t go doin’ anything else stupid, boy.”

Castiel replies that he won’t, though he crosses his fingers behind his back as he says it. He can’t promise that he’ll behave himself tonight, not when he wants so badly to erase everything that he’s done up until now. There’s no going back, no fixing what he’s already done…so why even bother? He’ll let Gabriel take him to this party, let whatever happens happen, and he will not care. He’ll drink himself numb, smoke himself into oblivion, and maybe with a little help from substances, he’ll finally get a night of sleep without dreams.

Castiel says goodbye to Sonny and promises not to be home late, without knowing whether or not he’ll be able to keep that promise. He climbs into the backseat of Kali’s car and drifts off into his thoughts again while loud pop music pumps out a beat through the speakers.

They drive back into Lawrence, into a wealthy neighborhood nearby to where Crowley and Lisa live. All up and down the suburban street sit cars parked against the curbs. They end up parking most of the way up the block and walking down to Baldur’s house, Kali’s heels clicking against the concrete as her hips sway from side to side.

The event is in full swing when Baldur lets them into the house. He hugs Castiel and gives Gabe a fist bump, but cautiously eyes Castiel in a “why is he here” kind of way. Castiel just pushes past him and makes a beeline for the kitchen, where surely there should be the supply of alcohol. Sure enough, a couple of football players sit laughing with beer bottles in hand while a couple of them play a round of beer pong.

Castiel sidesteps them and goes straight for a bottle of expensive vodka. He pours a shot’s worth into a solo cup and tips it down his throat. Vodka isn’t his favorite, but it gets the job done. He feels the burn of alcohol down his throat and the soft blur of numbness at the edges of his brain. He needs more.

Another two shots later, and Castiel has intoxicated himself into having enough confidence to venture out into the living room, where Baldur’s music is loudest and there are teenagers draped over every surface, chatting and drinking and dancing together. A long-haired guy that looks vaguely familiar, possibly somebody Castiel crosses paths with at The Shed at Smoky Bluff, gives him a yellow-toothed grin and offers Castiel something he’s only ever seen before in movies and on the internet.
It’s a sheet of acid tabs, decorated with a colorful design reminiscent of Lisa Frank.

“You want, man?”

And why not? He’s come this far, hasn’t he?

Castiel accepts and places the little tab on his tongue. Long-haired guy tells him to keep it in, chew it and let it hang out in his mouth for a while, and so Castiel does. He swallows after messing around long enough for the song in the background to change. Now it’s a sticky-sounding rap song, something narrated by a man with a deep, sultry voice that makes Castiel feel hot under the collar of his t-shirt. He returns to the kitchen to wash everything down with some beer. One of the football players passes him a can when he stumbles in and feels around for alcohol.

He ends up talking to the guy, a beefy, goofy-faced linebacker.

“Hey, wait, aren’t you that kid that spray painted Principal Milton’s car?” he asks.

Castiel lifts his beer and grins, “Guilty as charged.”

The football player smiles a little and sips at his beer, “That’s cool. Did you hear they made GSA a club again after you got the boot?”

“Yeah,” Castiel says, “How do you know that?” Going by appearance, this is a good ol’ boy football player – and therefore should like three important things: beer, women and sports.

The guy just smiles and shakes his head. He shrugs and nurses more beer, “Came out after you pulled your stunt with your boyfriend or whatever.”

Oh.

Well then.

“Not my boyfriend anymore,” Castiel hums. He chugs the rest of his beer at that. He wonders when this acid is supposed to kick in. So far he just feels drunk, depressed and kind of horny.

“That sucks, dude,” says the football player.

“Yeah,” Castiel says, “Whatever. You wanna get out of here?”

“Huh?”

Castiel tosses aside his empty beer can and surges up to kiss him, wrapping his arms around that thick neck to pull him down the couple inches it takes to reach Castiel’s mouth. He tastes like beer and Pizza Bagels, and while it doesn’t taste that great, Castiel likes the way that his tongue feels, likes the way that it makes him forget every little thing that’s going on.

As Castiel pulls the football player up to the second level of the house, the world starts to look bendy and he feels itchy in his skin. He starts to laugh and laugh and laugh between kisses with this big football player. He likes the way that his muscled arms and the soft pad of his stomach feel as they feel around each other. His senses amplify as LSD settles into his system. He’s dizzy with sensation, kissing and touching, shoving the nameless football player back into somebody’s bedroom.

It smells like plug-in air freshener and fabric softener, and Castiel is ten kinds of ready to defile it horribly. He wants to be f*cked out of remembering love, remembering loving people and being loved by those same people. He never deserved to feel that way and maybe having somebody get
rough with him will bring him back to earth.

“Shit, this comforter feels amazing,” he laughs when they flop back onto the bed, tongues tangling up again in an instant.

The football player murmurs against Castiel’s lips, “You’re really high, man.”

Castiel just laughs at this, because he’s right, he’s so right. He’s got these intense, crazy blue eyes and this tongue that feels like velvet and he’s right. Cas doesn’t care, just wants to erase every memory that he’s made from the past two and a half years. He’ll gladly return to being a lonely, forgotten orphan shit if it means that he never has to lose anyone’s love.

The football guy loses his Smoky Bluff Varsity t-shirt and Castiel feels all over his chest. He’s kind of hairy, and that’s interesting. A bear. He’s never slept with a bear before. Crowley was only kind of a bear. Castiel kisses one nipple and says, “You’re pretty.”

Football Guy laughs too and says, “Man, that’s the first time I’ve ever heard that.”

Time starts to fizzle together in strokes of tongues and love bites, exploratory touches and soft, fucked-up laughter echoing in his ears.

When Football Guy reaches down to unbutton Castiel’s jeans and slips his hands inside his underwear, squeezing his hard-on experimentally, Cas realizes he doesn’t want this anymore. Oh god. His heart starts to beat faster. He starts to panic as he thinks of Crowley, thinks of how he wanted it to stop but it didn’t until he shouted.

But when he finds his voice, it arrives only as a stammer, “I-I…stop, please.”

Football Guy frowns and pulls his hand out of Castiel’s pants. “What’s up, man?” he asks.

Castiel is abruptly in tears.

“Whoa, whoa,” Football Guy says, and pulls up and away from Cas. He retrieves Castiel’s black t-shirt from the floor and hands it to him sheepishly.

“Sorry,” Castiel says, and all of the color and bendiness that the world had to it that was so fun a few minutes ago is suddenly awful and scary. He wants to go home, wants Mama to hold him and tell him that everything will be all right. He doesn’t care that he’s nearly seventeen and should be able to care for himself. He just wants a hug from his mom, and that’s Missouri.

He repeats, “I’m so sorry,” and rubs at his teary face, “This was dumb.”

And he loves Dean. He couldn’t sleep with another guy when he’s so fucking head over heels for Dean. He struggles to get his shirt back over his head and Football Guy ends up helping him. He says, “Hey, it’s cool. You want me to help you find somebody?”

Castiel nods dumbly and says, “My brother’s somewhere around here. Gabriel.”

“Kali’s dude?” asks Football Guy.

Castiel nods, and Football Guy helps him back down the stairs. He’s drunk and high and stumbling everywhere and this is probably what people refer to as a bad trip because the teenagers dancing in the living room fluctuate from bags of hormones grinding against one another to the monsters featured in his own drawings, sharp-toothed beasts with clawed hands ripping at one another’s guts.
But there’s an angel in the midst, and oh God, it’s Gabriel. Huge, golden wings sprout from his back as he chats with Kali and sips something from a red Solo cup.

“Shit, what happened to him, dude?” asks Gabriel, and catches Castiel when he stumbles forward.

“I ate some Lisa Frank something,” Castiel mumbles.

Gabriel gives him a look, and the golden wings behind him ruffle irritably. “You dropped acid? What the hell is it, 1976?” Castiel just moans into Gabriel’s neck. Gabe pats him on the shoulder and says, “All right, buckaroo, we should probably get you home before you make any more bad decisions.”

That sounds like the best plan of action.

“Okay,” he says, and turns around to thank Football Guy for helping him get to his brother, but he’s already vanished back into the throes of the party.

Castiel doesn’t even care that Kali looks annoyed all over again, and ignores the hushed argument that she and Gabriel has as they navigate through demons and monsters and demi-gods to Baldur’s front door. It’s chilly outside when they make it. Castiel shivers, and Gabriel sheds his jacket and drapes it across Cas’ shoulders.

“You’re an idiot, kid,” he mutters.

“I know,” groans Castiel, and asks, “How are your wings supposed to fit in Kali’s car?”

“My what now?” Gabe asks, and then shakes his head, “Nevermind. Get in the damn car, bucko.”

Gabriel has to buckle Castiel in because he fumbles too much with the seatbelt. He and Kali still argue as they get back on the road, but Castiel isn’t really hearing anything that they say, just feels the angry tones of their voices against his ears like cheese graters. He moans and tosses his head and tries to make it stop.

Gabriel’s wings are in his face.

He thinks he falls asleep in the backseat, because very suddenly Kali’s car pulls up the front of Sonny’s. Everything in his vision is still weird, but it’s not quite as bad as it was before. When Gabe comes around the car and pulls Castiel from the passenger seat, Cas tumbles onto the ground and vomits onto Sonny’s dirt driveway.

“At least he waited ‘til we were out of the car, huh?” Gabriel jests. Kali rolls her eyes.

Gabriel heaves him up and helps him inside. Vaguely Castiel hears Sonny asking what the hell happened to Cas while they were out, and Kali’s smooth voice explaining something that’s probably a lie. Or maybe it’s the truth and he’ll be in a mess of trouble when he wakes up tomorrow morning. Except that he thinks it is morning, just the small hours of it.

“What the everloving fuck is wrong with you, kiddo?” Gabriel asks.

Castiel just whines, “I want Mama.”

Gabe helps him into bed, past other boys already tucked up asleep. At least they don’t have horns and tails and gnashing teeth like the people at the party. Castiel thinks that they might be on an airship, now, though.
“All right, into bed you go,” Gabriel says.

“I fucked up,” Cas says, “I miss Dean. Miss Mama. Miss everybody. Why am I so fucked up?”

“You’ll be fine,” Gabriel says, but Castiel knows it’s a blatant lie. He pulls the covers up over Castiel and goes on, “Except you’re going to have a killer hangover in the morning. Just go to sleep.”

Castiel agrees to this, and a vague amount of time later, he hears Gabriel’s heavy footsteps leaving the room. With his brother gone, he’s left to his own thoughts, thoughts of Dean, thoughts of the bad thing he almost did with Football Guy. They’re broken up, so he doesn’t think it would be cheating…but it would be, kind of, because he’d be cheating emotionally.

That doesn’t make sense.

When Castiel finally gets to sleep, his dreams are consumed by visions of Dean with sandy-brown angel wings.

X

Unsurprisingly, when Castiel wakes the following morning (afternoon, actually) he feels like he’s gotten into a losing fight with a steamroller. He spends the first few minutes of wakefulness hunched over the porcelain throne, vomiting what little his stomach contains. He remains there several minutes after his last heave into the toilet bowl until Sonny comes to collect him, a tall glass of water and some Advil in his leathery palm.

“Thank you,” Castiel manages to groan out. He takes the medicine and downs the glass of water, swishing the last sip in his mouth to clean out the taste of bile.

He is also not surprised when he ends up with a new set of chores to complete in his post vodka-acid-extravaganza, beginning with mucking out the horse stalls, which makes him queasy all over again.

And that’s how it goes.

Castiel falls back into necessary sobriety. Under Sonny’s watchful eye, he can’t sneak anything from the liquor cabinet and has to endure school like the average teenager – he continues to eat lunch in the bathroom, barely contains the desire to sock various people in the jaw (though in physics class he has since been removed from his homophobic table partner and now sits beside a mousy girl in glasses whose tests he sometimes copies), and tries to move past the constant desire for the sweet release of death.

He does start taking calls from Mama Missouri, though. Even though he knows he doesn’t deserve it, he wants her attention and likes when she talks to him, tells him that it’ll be okay. They’ll be going to court for the adversary hearing pretty soon, and everyone seems confident that Castiel will be back at Sugar Lane in no time at all.

In the meantime, he suffers, friendless and alone, in Baldwin City.

He must sound depressed on the phone with Missouri one night after school, because the following afternoon, Gabriel shows up at the front of Sonny’s farmhouse in her van. Sonny frowns deeply at him and says, “No more acid trips,” when they both make for the front door.

“You got it, sir,” Gabriel says.

There are indeed no acid trips, but Gabriel does drive them close to the KU campus, where they visit
an area near to Benny’s tattoo shop.

“Where are you taking me?” Castiel finally asks, after they’ve walked over three blocks of gum-ridden sidewalk, past smoke shops and clothing boutiques, dodging groups of college students still bright-eyed from the beginning of the semester.

“We’re grabbing something to take the edge off,” Gabriel says, “not acid, though.”

Castiel rolls his eyes. He doesn’t intend to make a repeat episode of his holy acid trip.

They end up at some weird spiritualist store, the kind that caters to wealthy, white college students looking to explore their inner selfness, or whatever college students do. A bell tinkles above the door as they step in. The whole place smells like patchouli, walls covered in tie-dyed tapestries smattered in Hindu deities, shelves loaded with jade statues of the Buddha and Ganesh candle holders.

“Gabester!” the guy at the counter calls. They bump fists and chat for a while about stuff that Castiel doesn’t know anything about, some new indie album they both like and the prospect of seeing the live show when the band comes to town.

“This is my little brother,” Gabriel finally says, after fifteen minutes of Castiel awkwardly hovering nearby and pretending to examine a hand-carved wooden chess set with a hefty price tag attached to the bottom of it. He pulls Cas forward and says, “Castiel needs a little something-something to get his mind off shit.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” says Gabe’s stoner friend, “Follow me, man.” The guy smells like body odor and some kind of perfume, probably something they sell in the shop. He walks them into a back room messy with boxes stacked on top of one another, and complete with the smell of overcooked microwave food. Gabriel passes him a wad of bills.

Castiel almost insists that he should pay for whatever mess of drugs they’re inevitably purchasing, before he remembers that he lost his job at the movie theater as soon as he was arrested, and has no source of income.

When Stoner Friend plops a baggie of pot into Castiel’s hand, a sense of relief fills him. Yeah, this’ll work in making him feel a little better. There won’t be any hallucinations of demons grinding up against each other and feasting on one another’s organs, but he’ll be happy and hungry and won’t have to think too hard on how much he longs for everyone that he’s succeeded in shoving away.

Because Castiel is so pleased with the idea of smoking a joint, he ends up purchasing a couple of things with his dwindling funds – an stone incense burner, a packet of ‘cinnamon chai’ incense, and a book on meditation that looks the least silly. When they leave with their goods, Gabriel’s stoner friend waves them out with a cheerful smile on his face.

“Don’t say I never did anything nice for you,” Gabriel says.

“I won’t,” Castiel swears solemnly, and intends to keep that promise.

X

It does help.

Castiel spends the next several days escaping between chore sessions to smoke alone in the barn behind rusting farm equipment, on a blanket smuggled from the bedroom. He reads about meditation techniques and tries a few while he enjoys his highs, lighting incense and letting his mind settle. Sometimes it helps and other times he finds his thoughts anchored firmly to Dean, sometimes to Sam
and the marks from his heroin-filled needles.

But mostly, it helps.

He doesn’t have to think of how much he’s lost this way, can just settle back into the smells of weed and incense, the feel of a blanket underneath his crossed legs while he hums to himself or lies back to sharpen his meditation skills. It works pretty well for ignoring the world.

He could make it through this way. School starts to improve when you smoke between class periods. He doesn’t care about the looks that he gets from teachers and some of the other students at the skunky smell that sticks to his clothes and follows him around, doesn’t care when his papers and tests come back with scores of Cs and Ds. Doesn’t matter, he doesn’t care, he’s numb to it all.

When Castiel makes it back to Mama Missouri, it’ll all be better. He won’t have to worry about anything anymore. Sure, he won’t be allowed back in the hallways of Smoky Bluff, he’ll be attending some other shit public high school, but at least he’ll have his old friends, and he can apologize to Dean and patch up everything that he’s fucked up beyond all recognition. He can help Sam.

Yeah, that sounds nice.

But then there are times that Castiel still feels angry at Dean, flames of frustration managing to break through his highs and lick at the edges of his gut. He wants to shout, wants to tell the anger to go away, but gives into it mostly, letting himself rage over how little Dean cared for Castiel in his time of need, and how much he always cares about stupid John Winchester, no matter how badly he treats his sons.

It’s in one of his moods that Sonny finds him on a Thursday October afternoon and hands him the telephone with a terse, “Got Sam callin’ for you.”

Castiel isn’t sure that he wants to talk to Sam, but it wouldn’t be fair to push him away. He’ll help Sam Winchester where Dean Winchester refused to help Castiel. He holds the phone up against his ear and answers, “Hey Sam.”

“Cas,” Sam says, voice sounding rough and used.

“You all right?” Castiel asks.

“No,” Sam says, “Look, I’m not calling about me. I’m calling about Dean.”

“I’m not talking about Dean with you,” Castiel replies, voice firm.

“Cas, I’m serious,” Sam desperately replies, “He’s really fucked up over whatever happened with you guys, and it’s freaking me out.”

“That’s his fault.”

“Stop it,” Sam snaps, “You’re being an asshole. Both of you are. Why won’t you just talk to each other? Dean’s been partying, been dicking around with liquor a lot more and I’m really worried –”

“Like father like son, then,” Castiel says.

“Dude, what the hell?” Sam says, “You’re being unfair.”

“I’m not. He’s the one that needs to apologize to me, and you’re making this out to be entirely my
fault,” Castiel says icily.

“I’m not!” Sam insists, “It’s both your faults, you stupid fucking idiots. Dean needs you and you need Dean and all I want is for you guys to stop being stupid and make up already. Gabe says you’re just as messed up as Dean is.”

“Gabriel should mind his own damn business,” Castiel replies, cold. He hangs up after that, unable to deal with Sam’s accusations and pleading voice. Dean owes him apology, Gabriel has no right to share his state of mind with Sam, and everyone just needs to leave him alone.

He’s better off alone anyway.

X

Castiel thinks that it’s all over after he hangs up that phone call. He spends the next couple of days smoking away the last of the weed in the plastic baggie and wondering how the hell he’s supposed to acquire more without a ride to Lawrence or any money in the bank account that Mama Missouri helped him set up when he got his dumb job at the movie theater.

It figures that if he’s desperate to be left alone, he can’t even have that.

Sam Winchester shows up after Castiel has smoked his very last joint. He’s flying high but that still doesn’t cushion the sight of Sam. He looks awful, pale and shadowy-eyed. He’s trembling and looks like he might throw up.

He hasn’t sought help; that much is clear. Castiel drags him outside and rolls up the sleeve of his sweatshirt. Sure enough, new bites of the needle mark the crook of his elbow, irritated and red. Sam rips his arm away and says, “Stop it, Cas.”

“You told me you were going to talk to Dean.”

“I said I’d think about it,” Sam bites back. “and I might have, if you didn’t fuck him up.”

“I didn’t fuck him up,” Castiel argues, “He fucked himself up.”

“Hey, you know what? Fuck you,” Sam spits, “I came here as a courtesy, you shithead. Dean’s missing.”

That makes Castiel pause.

“What?” he squeezes out.

“Dean is missing,” Sam says, throwing his hands up in the air, “I tried to tell you on the phone. He’s been missing for three days.”
While Sonny lectures one of the other boys, Castiel sneaks by and grabs the keys to Sonny’s old pickup. It’s an ugly truck, decades old with faded, powder blue paint peeling and rust spots on the outside of the bed – but it’s a reliable vehicle, better than Ruth’s sketchy piece of nineteen nineties junk, and Castiel doesn’t know how long they’re going to need to drive.

Quietly, Castiel herds Sam out the back door and toward the truck. They throw open the doors and climb in. With a rumble, the vehicle roars to life, and Castiel prays that Sonny is too occupied dealing with the other kids that he doesn’t hear, doesn’t think to check that his truck remains in its place behind the farmhouse. As they roll away toward the road, Castiel’s heart pumps hard, blood rushing in his ears as they hit the road. He’s only ever driven a few times, never with Dean but a couple times with Gabriel, once or twice with Missouri, and a few more times with Sonny, since the man made Cas get his learner’s permit.

So he’s used to the trappings of this vehicle, enough to get them the hell out of dodge and start jetting toward Lawrence at top speed.

Belatedly, Castiel reaches for his seatbelt and pulls it across his chest. He turns down the volume on the radio and asks Sam, “Do you know where he could be?”

“I don’t have any idea,” Sam says, “I thought maybe you would know. ‘Cause you guys are close, you know. But it’s not like him to just up and leave and not say a damn word to anybody. I’m really worried, Cas.”

“It’s okay,” Castiel says, and then corrects, “Actually, no, it is not at all okay. But it will be. We’ll find him, Sam. Now think. What has Dean been doing? Where does he go? Has he showed up to work?”

“Of course he hasn’t been to work,” snaps Sam, “That’s one of the reasons I tried to call, ‘cause Dean wasn’t missing work, he was just showing up hungover and fucked up and getting lectured by Bobby. But he hasn’t been to the yard, hasn’t been with Charlie, hasn’t come home in three days. What if something happened to him?”

Castiel’s heart drops somewhere around the brake pedal. He swallows and wonders, Christ, what if? What if Castiel screwed up so beyond the realm of his typical screw-ups that he pushed Dean into danger? Dean doesn’t cope well, he knows that. He knows that Dean drinks when he feels badly, knows that he falls back on drinking and pot to cushion his fall when he’s hurt. Castiel hurt him, and the chance that Dean drank to relieve that is less of a chance and more of an accepted reality.
And if Dean drinks heavily, he’s far more likely to do something incredibly stupid.

Castiel realizes that Sam is looking expectantly. He clears his throat and tries to think of something reassuring to say, but can only come up with, “I-I don’t know. I don’t know what we’d do. We’ll find him. Just tell me what he’s been doing.”

“Partying,” Sam mutters.

“Okay. Where?”

“Lots of places,” Sam says, “Some house parties and stuff. He’s been totally blowing Charlie off ‘cause she doesn’t want to drink with him. I think he’s been hanging with his tattoo artist. Was he the one that did your guys’ matching tattoos? Benny?”

“Yeah, I know Benny,” Castiel says, “We’ll start there. Run by his shop, see if he’s seen Dean. Okay?”

Sam catches his lower lip between his teeth and nods, “Yeah,” he says in his scratchy, roughed-up voice, “Yeah, that sounds good.”

And then, after a long stretch of road and of silence, Sam adds, “Thanks, Cas. I know me n’ Dean have kind of messed up a lot of junk, so…”

“Sam, none of this was you,” Castiel says, firm, “I admit that I’ve been angry with Dean, but it’s not…I just wanted things to be okay, and I made them even more messy than before. It was my fault.”

“No –”

“I don’t want to argue about this, Sam,” Cas says. His voice his sharp enough that Sam just lowers his eyes and murmurs a soft okay as they drive.

The ride is tense. Castiel can tell that Sam wants to say more, wants to clear the air, explain himself, but that he doesn’t. Instead, he chews on his lips, pulling the skin from them until they crack and bleed. He looks even worse than he did the last time that Castiel saw him, milk white and dark-eyed, hair greasy and body trembling with the weight of withdrawal.

Castiel can’t parallel park to save his life, despite Sonny’s efforts to teach him, and so he parks illegally in the parking lot for some ritzy boutique a couple blocks down from Physical Graffiti Tattoo. When he and Sam climb from the pickup, he can see just how poorly a job that he has done, butt of the vehicle sticking out crookedly. He doesn’t care. All he can think about is Dean, where he is and if he’s okay, or if he’s in trouble like Sam thinks that he might be.

They walk briskly over the sidewalk. A couple people look at them curiously – Castiel can pass for a little older than he is, maybe as a particularly fresh-faced KU freshman, but Sam looks young and ill, growth spurt aside.

When they parade into Physical Graffiti, it’s much fuller than it was last time that Castiel came in. There are artists at every station, needles buzzing in a chorus on and off as they work. The smell of disinfectant is high in the air, pungent and lemony. The artist closest to the door, a grizzled man with a long beard and ears stretched and holding marble weights says, “You kids look a little young to be here.”

“Is Benny here?” Castiel asks.
The guy rubs at his sweat-glistening forehead with the sleeve of his Henley and points toward the back of the shop with his latex-gloved hands. He says, “Make it quick, guys. He’s got a client.”

Benny is immersed in the thick, black lines of a woman’s back piece, a design with creatures and swirls that Castiel imagines will be soon filled in with color. When Benny pauses to re-ink, he glances up and sees them.

“Castiel,” he draws out, “Whatcha doin’ here, brother?”

“We’re looking for Dean,” Castiel says, “Have you seen him?”

“Not in a couple days,” Benny says, “Why?”

“He missing,” Sam pipes up, “If you saw him two days ago, you’re the last person that’s seen him. So where did he go?”

“Well, shit,” Benny says, but goes back to filling over the blue lines left by the trace paper on his client’s back. He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue and says, “Yeah, we hit up this shindig a couple days back, it’s kinda far out of town, though, boys.”

“That’s fine, where is it?”

“Give me a second,” Benny says.

He finishes up a section of the back piece before his needle stops buzzing. He murmurs to his client to take a quick break and rummages around in the drawers beside his station. He pulls out a pen and clicks the top, scribbling onto a scrap of paper. He hands it to Castiel and says, “This is the address of the joint. Uh, it’s a little sketchy. Might want to bring backup.”

“We’ll be fine,” Castiel says, and tucks the address into his pocket, “Thank you, Benny.”

“Good luck, brother,” Benny says, “Let me know if y’all find him.”

X

Neither of them has a smart phone, and Sonny’s car doesn’t include the luxury of a GPS, so Sam and Castiel make a pit stop at the library at KU, dipping in to use one of the computers and print off a set of directions from Google Maps. The air around them is electric, palpable. They don’t speak beyond a few, terse instructions.

As they climb back into the truck, Castiel flips his phone open to find several missed calls from Sonny and one angry text message that reads where are you???

Castiel answers back, looking for Dean. Be back later.

After that, he switches off his phone and tucks it back away in his pocket where it’s out of sight and out of mind. Sam is designated keeper of the directions, holding the printer paper in his white-knuckled, shaking hands. The address Benny gave them lies just over forty-five minutes outside of Lawrence, in an area that looks to contain very little.

What if Dean has been rounded up by backwoods Deliverance-type yokels that are holding him against his will? If Dean is hurt, Castiel doesn’t know what he’ll do, how he’ll forgive himself for shoving Dean away when he should have gathered him up into his arms. They need each other, and Castiel was selfish. Dean needed him as much as he needed Dean.
Shit.
Shit, shit, shit.

“Don’t,” Sam says from behind him.

“Don’t what?” Castiel asks.

“You’re blaming yourself for this,” Sam says, “Don’t do it.”

“No, I’m not,” Castiel insists.

“Yes, you are,” Sam says back, “I’ve lived with Dean my whole life. I know what somebody blaming themselves looks like, and you have it written all over your face.”

“Yes, well, it’s my fault,” Castiel replies, “I hurt Dean. If I didn’t hurt him, he wouldn’t have done this. You know that’s true.”

“Stop it,” Sam says, fists clenching around the Google Maps directions in his lap, “It would have happened anyway. Maybe it wouldn’t have been today, maybe it would have happened in a few years. But Dean is an unexploded bomb, and you know that. Everything that’s been going on…it just pushed him over the edge. Me too. It pushed us both.”

Castiel studies Sam for a moment before training his eyes back on the road in front of him.

He says, “I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” agrees Sam.

After that, Castiel turns the radio back on. It’s set to the classic rock station, and instead of aggravating him like it usually does, it comforts him, like Dean is there in the truck with them, urging them on. It's a silly sentiment that somebody could magically appear in the back of your vehicle and guide you in the right direction, he knows, but it makes him feel better to think it.

When Castiel and Sam pull up to the address, he thinks they might be in the wrong place. It’s a weird conglomeration of broken down trailers, some shitty-looking cars, and a dilapidated house that looks like it violates some legal safety code. But the faded number nailed to the foremost of the porch columns matches the numbers written down in Benny’s neat hand.

Castiel parks the truck a distance away and pulls the key from the ignition. He and Sam linger in the seats for a moment. Neither of them moves until Castiel says, “Well.”

“Here goes nothing,” Sam says.

They cross the dirt lot to the house. The porch complains under their combined weights. Both Sam and Castiel glance down before the keep going, dodging a ceramic statue of a rabbit that looks like it was yanked from the forties, or more likely, a creepy antique shop that smells of moth balls and the ghosts of the past.

No one answers when Sam tries the doorbell, and again when Castiel knocks.

“Let’s just go in,” Castiel at last decides.

The door swings open with the barest touch. Sam and Castiel take careful steps inside, letting the front door close behind them. The carpet underfoot is unvacuumed and stained by mystery substances. It smells like an unholy combination of dust, cigarette smoke, pot, cat piss and a million
different kinds of incense. Castiel gags a little on the miasma and reaches in his pocket to retrieve his inhaler, pumping medicine into his lungs.

“Smells like crap,” Sam mentions, and wrinkles his nose.

There are a couple people passed out on the couch in the front room, ash trays filled on the cluttered coffee table at their feet. A skinny cat crawls over their laps, and hisses when she sees Sam and Castiel. Castiel takes a step back, but Sam stands his ground, brows drawn together.

From the look of it, Castiel guesses that they’ve stumbled upon some kind of after-party party. The people here range from looking even as young as Sam to perhaps mid-thirties. The common denominator between them is how fucked up they all are. The whole house is wrecked with the foul stench of neglect, of people so beyond the realm of caring that they live in their own filth.

When they pass a sunken-eyed girl with ratty brown hair pressing a needle into her arm, Sam begins to shake beside him. He stands stock still and Castiel doesn’t realize that Sam isn’t beside him until he almost turns the corner. He retreats and closes his hand around Sam’s arm.

“I need it,” Sam says weakly, and pulls back a little.

“No, you don’t,” Castiel replies, “What you need is to help me find Dean. Remember?”

Sam swallows. He glances from the girl on the floor, needle still in her arm. Her eyes roll toward the ceiling, glazed and blissed-out. But then Sam pulls his eyes back to Castiel, jaw clenched tight, and nods. Still, as they tour through the house, Sam quakes and shudders. He’s in pain.

They do not find Dean on the lower level of the establishment, and Castiel doubts that there’s anybody inside within their wits collected enough to help them find a missing teenager last seen at this address.

The stairs are just as ugly as the floor below, carpet mangled. As their heavy steps sound, Sam knocks an empty beer bottle off of one of the steps and sends it flying to the ground. It bounces down the steps and lands at the bottom, shattering into a million pieces of brown glass. No one seems to care.

“Dean?” Sam calls, “Dean! Are you here?”

Nobody answers them. They open the doors in the upstairs hallways to rooms empty of Dean. The bathroom has a bearded man sleeping in the tub and a middle-aged man hunched over the unflushed toilet, fast asleep and snoring. Sam gags on the smell and they shut the door.

The sound of music filters out from the last bedroom in the hall, waves of strong guitar making it through the walls. Inside, there’s a mattress in stain-spattered sheets, covered in people. There are more than a few of them in various states of undress, some with wild-colored hair. The source of the music is somebody’s iPod hooked up into an old set of computer speakers. The guitar fades out and bleeds into a new song, some trance music that abuses the synthesizer.

Then Castiel sees him.

Dean’s legs are up on the mattress with a chubby, teal-haired person in a mesh shirt sprawled across them. His face is planted in the carpet in a puddle of his own vomit.

“Dean!” Castiel exclaims. He tears forward and grabs Dean’s face in both hands. He makes a whining noise, and that’s good, that’s great. Even if he doesn’t wake up, it means that Dean is alive. With a heave, Castiel pulls Dean out from under his teal-haired companion, dragging him away from
the knot of partiers on the mattress and into the clear.

“Some assistance would be appreciated, Sam,” Castiel says, and Sam scrambles to lift Dean up on one side while Castiel takes the other. His dead weight is difficult to lift but with a little maneuvering they manage it, pulling Dean’s arms over their shoulders and bringing him out into the hallway. Dean mumbles something but doesn’t rouse from his stupor.

With their combined effort, it still takes Sam and Castiel a solid ten minutes to safely bring Dean down the stairs. Castiel watches Sam’s set determination not to look at the same girl they saw on their way in with the needle in her arm.

Being outside the house is a relief. Castiel breathes deep, gulping in air that doesn’t have that weird, rotting smell to it. They drag Dean across the lot and prop him up against the pickup while Castiel fumbles with the keys. They arrange Dean in the passenger’s seat and buckle him in, while Sam squeezes into the small middle seat.

It’s only as Castiel climbs in and starts the truck that a profound sense of relief washes over him. Dean. He’s safe. He’s in terrible shape, but he’s alive, and he’s safe. Castiel can say that he’s sorry, say that he made yet another mistake and Dean was a victim of that.

“He’s okay,” Castiel says out loud when they’re finally away from that house.

“Kind of,” Sam says. He’s frowning at where the movement of the car has shaken Dean into being slumped against the window. He touches Dean’s shoulder, and Dean makes a noise of complaint, batting at Sam’s hand.

Castiel keeps the radio on. In some odd part of his mind, he wants Dean to wake up surrounded by the sound of classic rock. He doesn’t know if that will help, but perhaps it might. And if there’s the possibility, then he feels free to indulge himself.

Dean wakes up to the sound of \textit{Hell’s Bells}.

He blearily looks to Cas and Sam, coughs, and announces, “Pull over, pull over, shit.”

Castiel hurries to obey, pulling the truck to the side of the road. Dean struggles with his seatbelt and wrenches open the truck door. When he stumbles outside, he falls to his knees and vomits up watery bile into the dirt. Castiel hastens to turn off the truck and ring around it to join Dean.

He crouches beside him and rubs a hand over his back as he heaves. Neither Castiel nor Sam says anything, just stand by as Dean spills the scant contents of his stomach onto the ground. When he finishes, he wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and blinks up at Cas and Sam.


“You’ve been missing for three days, Dean,” Sam says petulantly.

“What the – I have?” Dean says. He looks to their faces for confirmation and, finding no deception, he curses, “Well, fuck. Fuck me. I don’t remember the last time I ate. Son of a bitch, everything hurts.” He groans and massages his head before giving one underarm a smell check and wincing.

“We can stop for food,” Castiel carefully says, and looks to Sam as he adds, “I think perhaps it would be better to talk this all out without empty stomachs.” At this, Sam closes his eyes and nods.

Dean pulls his body up on his own, though his body shakes a little. Sam still has to help him into the truck, but Dean buckles himself. He exhales loudly and rubs his head again, asking as Castiel pulls
back onto the road toward Lawrence, and asks, “How’d you guys find me?”

“We went and asked Benny,” Castiel says.

“Must’ve told him to leave me,” Dean mumbles, “Don’t think he would have left me on my own,” then he eyes Castiel, “Wait, are we talking again?”

“We’ll get there,” replies Cas, and Dean seems to think that that is enough for the time being.

They pull the truck into the first place they find, a skeezy little diner with a faded red roof and window paint that proclaims a two for one special when you order the burger of the day. Castiel manages to park the truck a little better than he did the last couple of times, a fact of which he is proud.

The bleach blond waitress that greets them doesn’t look too thrilled at the sight. Castiel doesn’t blame her – Sam is twitching, Dean smells like body odor, liquor and vomit, and Castiel probably reeks of patchouli and weed. Plus, his high still hasn’t even quite worn off. She still smiles as she seats them and says she’ll bring them all some water.

Outside, the sun settles low in the sky. It’ll be dark before they make it back anywhere at this rate. Castiel has never tried night driving before. Maybe he should let Dean have the keys.

From his place across the table from Cas, Dean groans again and holds his head.

Maybe not.

By the time the waitress sets glasses of water in front of them, they each have an order lined up. To cheapen things, Dean and Sam agree to get two burgers of the day, while Castiel goes for a plain cheeseburger with a side of fries and a strawberry milkshake. He didn’t even realize how hungry he is until the smell of food hit his nose.

“So, uh, we’re talking?” Dean says, “Right?”

“Yes,” Castiel says slowly, “Perhaps Sam should start.”

Like a deer in headlights, Sam shakes his head.

“Yes, Sam, you are talking to Dean and you are doing it now, or I won’t I apologize to him for my behavior,” Castiel says, and folds his arms over his chest.

“What’s he talkin’ about, Sammy?” Dean asks, going from hungover and wrecked to concerned brother in a second flat.

Sam’s fingers twitch where they’re folded together on the table. He doesn’t look at Dean, but he does clear his throat and say, “I got in trouble.” His voice is so quiet, so timid. Castiel hates seeing him like this, because he knows Sam hates to disappoint Dean and knows that’s what his confession will mean.

“What kind a’ trouble?”

“Big trouble,” Sam says. He sighs and finally makes eye contact with his brother, “Dean, Ruby, she...fuck it, it wasn’t Ruby. It was me. Her mom’s into some bad shit and so she has access to some stuff she shouldn’t. We shot up together and now – now I can’t stop doing it.”

“You did what?” Dean demands.
“Shot up,” Sam says, hunching into himself, “H-Heroin.”

Dean stares at Sam for a long time. He doesn’t say anything, nothing at all. In the interim, their waitress brings their food, fresh and greasy smelling. Dean bites into his burger and chews, making a noise of satisfaction after the first swallow.

“I’m gonna tell you now that I’m pissed,” Dean says to Sam, “but we’re gonna make it okay again, you get me? I’m not gonna let you do that crap anymore but we’ll get help, all right? We’ll talk to Mama or something.”

At the mention of Missouri, Castiel feels a weight of sadness hang his heart lower.

“Okay,” Sam says. He’s sniffling and crying now, and he says, “I’m so sorry. I messed up real bad and I’m just so sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

“Sammy, we’ll worry about that later,” Dean says, “Right now we gotta help you get better. I’m not gonna lose you, you hear me? I’m furious and it is fucked up that you did that, but I wasn’t there… God, I fucked up too. Everything’s gone to hell and just – we’ll fix it. We will.”

“Okay,” Sam says again.

That one little word leaves enough room for them to all start eating again. Smelliness aside, the bad humor between them all begins to fade as the burgers settle in their stomach. Castiel sucks down his milkshake, and as he slurps at the last of it in the glass, Dean says, “So. Are we talking again, Cas?”

Cas nods, “Yes. I think it would be wise.”

“All right,” Dean says, and hesitates like he doesn’t know what to say, “How’ve you been?”

“Shitty,” Castiel shrugs, “What about you?”

“Shitty,” Dean answers, “What have you been doing?”

“Mostly getting high, I guess,” Castiel says, “And I did acid and almost slept with some guy at a party but felt bad ‘cause it felt like cheating at you, so I stopped. And you?”

Dean shrugs, “Partying. I almost fucked around on you too, but uh. Same deal. I just – I dunno, I couldn’t.”

At this, Castiel smiles. A familiar warmth settles into his chest, the one that tells him that somebody cares about him, even though nobody used to care at all. He taps his fingers against the table and says, “Look, Dean. I shouldn’t – have done what I did. Everything’s just so fucked up, you know? And you needed me and I needed you in this way that sucked in that moment and it just didn’t work. But that. That doesn’t mean that we’re not going to work.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “I’m sorry too. I didn’t – well, you were right. I always talk about my dad and I need to figure it out but I don’t know how. ‘Specially with him locked up, things are weird right now.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Castiel says.

Dean hums, “We always do, baby.”

The conversation flows easily after that. They discuss how they think the court proceedings will go for Castiel and Missouri, how bored each of them has been without the other, and the prospect of the
new season of Game of Thrones. The sky darkens throughout the talk, and Sam drifts off, falling asleep against Dean’s shoulder.

Dean lets him, and lifts one hand from his lap to the table. It inches across to Castiel’s, and after a beat, Dean slides their fingers together. The warmth and weight of Dean’s hand in his is a sensation that Castiel didn’t even realized that he missed, but he smiles at it, and then looks up to see Dean smiling right back.

Chapter End Notes

While you're all here, I do have a little recommendation for you. My beta has recently started writing Destiel fics and is now working on her first chaptered piece. It's a HS AU and it's truly lovely, so you should definitely read her beautiful fic and leave her love!
Chapter Notes

One more chapter after this, guys! Thank you all for your support.

Chapter Track: Coming Home – Diddy – Dirty Money

Chapter Notes

Back Where I Belong

Back Where I Belong

The sky is dark and stars out by the time that Castiel pulls Sonny’s truck ‘round past the sign for Sugar Lane Mobile Home Community. He parks in front of the collection of homes that belong to Mama Missouri, and for a while, just sits outside. Dean and Sam are asleep against one another in the seat beside him, Sam with his head slumped into Dean’s chest, slipping dangerously toward falling in his lap.

“Guys,” Cas finally says, and pulls the keys from the ignition, “We’re back home.”

Not just the Winchesters’ home. His home, too.

Dean snorts awake and groans a little, rubbing a hand over his face while Sam massages the sleep from his eyes.

Castiel leans into Dean when they walk up into Mama’s house. He still doesn’t smell very good, but it’s Dean, and the warmth and weight of his body beside and against Castiel’s makes him feel immeasurably better than he has in what seems like forever.

When the front door closes behind them, they’re greeted by the instant presence of not only Mama Missouri, but Sonny, Bobby and Ellen.

“As you insane, boy?”

“Sugar, I could strangle you for bein’ so dumb!”

“Why’d you run off, you friggin’ idjits?”

“You could have been hurt! You’re so lucky you’re all back in one piece because if you weren’t I would put you all back together again just to kill you. I’ve seen some dumb shit in my day, boys, but this one really takes the cake.”

At first Dean looks like he may try to argue, face twisted up with a blend of frustration and embarrassment, but then the look falls. Dean just shakes his head and takes the tongue-lashings from all angles with Sam and Castiel. He guiltily scratches at the back of his neck and fesses up to his own stupidity, promising never to pull a disappearing act again if he can help it.

But then Bobby ropes Dean in for a bone-crushing hug, and the lectures dissolve into expressions of relief. Castiel contents himself with watching Sam and Dean get fussed over by Bobby and Ellen from a distance. Only then, the perfume of home cooking and practical, feminine soap engulfs him, and Mama’s arms encircle him, pulling him tight against her. She says to him, “I missed you, honey.”
“Missed you too, Mama,” Castiel says, and means it with every fiber of his being.

It feels good to be home, if only for just a little while, tucked up in his mom’s arms. He never understood when people said that they could go to their parents for advice, turn to them when they fell upon hard times or just needed a shoulder to cry on, but he understands now. This is his mom, and if ever Castiel got into trouble or needed a place he could always come back to for comfort, it’s right here. Not just in Sugar Lane or this home, but gathered up against Mama. She’s shorter than he is now, and it makes his heart ache in his chest to think that he has enough memories stored up with Missouri that he’s hugged her when he was smaller than her, and hugs her now with his height dwarfing hers.

“I love you, sweetheart,” Missouri says when she pulls away, “We’re so close to gettin’ you back where you belong. So close.”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel says to that.

“Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” he says, “Maybe because I messed up so much stuff. I keep trying to do things right and they never go the way I have them in my head.”

“Oh, Castiel,” Missouri says. She sticks her thumb in her mouth and wipes away something from his face with a press and a swipe, “Everyone makes mistakes like that. Sometimes it just takes some of us longer to get them right, hm? You think I was a peach when I was your age? No, sir, I was not. But I figured myself out somewhere along the road, and I got a good life now. You’ll be fine.”

With that said, Mama brews them all a round of tea while Dean slips out to shower at the boys’ home, desperate to wash of the skunky remnants of the party house where they found him. He returns with damp hair and fresh clothing while Sam and Castiel drink from their mugs and listen to the adults confer over how to handle the events of the night.

With the chaos surrounding Dean’s disappearance and the temporary and illegal use of Sonny’s truck to find him, it’s eventually established that while poor decisions were made on all three of their parts, Sam, Castiel and Dean will not be punished. It would do nothing but cause more hurt, Missouri says, but then also adds, “But so help me God, Castiel James, if you ever try something like that again I will whoop your butt into next Tuesday.”

She doesn’t mean it, he knows, but the fire in Missouri’s voice is enough to garner his promise never to run off with a truck that doesn’t belong to him ever again.

When Castiel finishes his tea, Sonny announces that they’ll have to drive back down to Baldwin City. A little sadness creeps in at this announcement, but Dean rubs Castiel’s back as they trek outside to the truck. Right before Castiel climbs into the passenger’s side, Dean pulls him in for a kiss.

It’s the sweetest kiss that Castiel has ever tasted, minty from toothpaste but perfect because it’s Dean. The familiar weight of Dean’s tongue stroking along the inside of his mouth sends waves of content, comfort and happiness into his limbs, waking them from their sleepy state so they come and wrap around Dean’s neck and pull him in closer. No one interrupts them, even when Castiel breaks the kiss and leans his head into Dean’s neck. He closes his eyes and rests there for several perfect seconds.

But then Sonny clears his throat, and he knows that it’s time to say goodbye again.
Castiel spends the drive back to Baldwin City quiet and satisfied, thinking of Mama and Dean and Sam and Gabriel and all the good people he has waiting for him back at home. Even when he and Sonny arrive back at the farmhouse and he trudges into the bedroom upstairs to the judgmental faces of the other boys, he doesn’t mind. Castiel just changes into his pajamas and slips under the covers of his bed, stretching out on the narrow mattress with a soft smile curving his lips.

When sleep finally weighs his eyelids down, Castiel drifts back into sweet dreams of Dean.

X

The happiness that eluded him at Sonny’s settles back over Castiel as he calls Mama Missouri every day, talking to her about everything, things as simple as the other boys staying with Sonny, to his adventures at the high school he so vastly dislikes, to how pleased he’s been with the drawings in his sketchbook (the caricatures have returned to being angels). In return she keeps him posted about the news on the other side.

Gabriel has purchased his own, ugly car and he loves it dearly.

Raphael is going to be running in the statewide cross country race.

Hester has a piece of art in her elementary school’s art show, and Missouri intends to ask Sonny if Castiel can come see it. She says it would mean the world to Hester for her “talented artist big brother” to come see her work. Castiel says he hopes that he can too.

But more importantly than all of these, Missouri relays one afternoon that Dean and Sam called Bobby and Ellen over and showed the three of them the marks on Sam’s arms. He’s snuck off to meet Ruby twice more since they decided that he needed to stop, and when came back he broke down and cried to Dean about what he’d done.

They’re going to fix it.

Dean tells him first, but in short words and misspelled text messages that come infrequently that day. When Missouri calls Castiel in the afternoon, she fills in the blank spaces that Dean leaves in between texts. That morning they took Sam to an inpatient drug rehab center and checked him into the adolescent recovery program. The program caters to more than patients with drug addiction, Missouri says, but they did their research and that center seemed best for Sam’s needs.

She sounds sad, and Castiel doesn’t blame her. When he thinks of Sam he always feels somehow responsible for what happened, like he should have taken better care of his friend. He knows Dean thinks the same, but doesn’t say much about it.

At the very least, Sam’s check-in to a program is a sign that things may be looking up.

For the first time, possibly ever, Castiel thinks he may be able to fight through the things that bog him down. His whole life has been one, huge battle, but this time, facing loneliness and solitude in a town he doesn’t like with peers he can’t stand, he thinks that he might still be okay. He will be okay, because he has his mom and he has his boyfriend and he has his friends and brothers and sisters.

Castiel knows that though he is lonely, he is not alone.

The Saturday following, he and Dean make plans to meet at Sonny’s and go out for lunch. Dean insists that it isn’t a date, since they’re planning on visiting Sam at the clinic immediately following, but Castiel still thinks of it as a kind of romantic rendezvous as he dresses that day. He wears his nice jeans and a t-shirt that he knows hugs his body in a pleasant way, and spends at least fifteen minutes in the bathroom combing his hair into different shapes until he screws it up with both hands and
decides to settle on his standard bedhead way of life.

When Dean walks into Sonny’s home, he looks like he usually does – messy hair, bright eyes, leather jacket and torn jeans over thick-soled combat boots. He kisses Castiel before he greets, “Heya, handsome, ready to hit the town?”

Cas snorts and replies, “I am as ready as I’ll ever be.”

Dean has one of Bobby’s old beaters, a low-riding truck that has holes in its leather-upholstered seats. The tape deck belts out one of the songs that Dean informs Castiel that he’s come to associate with him, AC/DC’s *You Shook Me All Night Long*. It makes Castiel smile as they roll away from Baldwin City and north back into Lawrence.

Dean takes them to one of their favorite pizza places, a hole-in-the-wall joint in a sequestered location close to the KU campus. They order a large pizza that’s half Mega Meaty and half Greek Delight (“How can you eat that junk, Cas? The cheese doesn’t even look like real cheese.” “It’s feta, Dean, and I can’t help it if you have poor taste in pizza toppings.”)

Dean peels off the end of his straw wrapper and blows through the straw so that the tube of paper shoots across the table and hits Cas in the nose. Dean laughs, and Castiel decides that he can’t be annoyed at a boy whose laugh sounds like that…and it’s a laugh that he hasn’t heard in a long time, so he just smiles and slurps at his Sprite.

“So Sammy’s liking the rehab joint we chose,” Dean says, stirring the ice cubes in his cup with his striped straw, “I guess he’s pretty popular with the staff. Probably ‘cause he’s a little suck-up, but what can you do? At least it seems to be helping.”

“Has he made any friends?” asks Castiel.

“Don’t think so,” Dean responds, “I think he’s kind of shy when it comes to that sort of thing. Always has been, you know? Maybe that’s why he was such easy pickings for Ruby, ‘cause he has trouble with friends.”

“Yeah,” agrees Cas, “That…that makes sense. He said something to me once about wishing he had friends that weren’t your friends first.”

Dean smiles bitterly at that and shakes his head. Thankfully, their pizza arrives before either of them has to speak, and they dig into melty, cheesy deliciousness instead of talking about Sam’s situation with his friends. Their fingers brush when they each reach for their first slice, and it makes Castiel’s stomach flutter with feeling.

Dean, evidently of the same mind, remarks, “So glad I get to touch you again, baby.”

“Me too,” says Cas, and they share a private grin.

When they finish eating, Dean covers the bill and Cas takes the tip despite his funds running dismally low, leaving a little extra because their waiter was nice and seemed stressed out. Dean kisses him as they walk outside, but then pulls away and makes a face, commenting, “You taste like that freaky Greek non-cheese.”

Castiel elbows him and laughs.

The joking filters away when they climb back into the loaned clunker, both of them with minds now on Sam. It seems wrong to be so happy and normal when Sam is locked away inside a rehab center, reportedly making friends with the nurses instead of anyone his age.
The place that Dean drives them to is a modest, pale-bricked building with a surrounding fence structure. They park in the modest, under-tended lot and walk side by side through the front doors to the building. A guy with glasses and a ponytail mans the front desk, and smiles when Dean says that they’re here to visit Sam.

“You must be his brother,” the guy says as they sign their names in on a chart attached to a wooden clipboard chipped at the edges, “He’s been goin’ on about seeing you all day. Sweet kid.”

He holds Dean’s driver’s license and Castiel’s learner’s permit up behind the front desk when they finish signing in for visiting hours, and directs them to go down a hallway to their right.

“There’ll be a couple of double doors open at the end,” he explains, “that’s the cafeteria and visiting room. You’ll find him in there.”

The room is as described, a white-walled cafeteria with plastic, round tables populating it throughout the room. Drawings scatter across the walls and give it a more intimate feel than overwhelmingly medical, which Castiel appreciates. He doesn’t like places sanitized of personality. The patients all wear white scrubs to distinguish them from the visiting friends and families. There’s an air of hope to the room, though under that lays the quiet tones of desperation. It isn’t perfect, but if Sam had to get better anywhere away from home, Castiel thinks this is a good place.

“Dean!”

Sam jogs over. His skin is still pale and his eyes a little shadowed, but there’s new lightness within them, a renewed energy that reminds Castiel of the Sam Winchester that he was before John’s crash. He wraps his arms around Dean and Dean gives him a pat on the back. He isn’t smiling like Sam, but the relief reads on his face like a children’s book.

“How’s it goin’, Sammy?” Dean asks.

Sam shrugs, and they snag an empty table toward the back of the cafeteria, closest to the windows where the sun spills in across the speckled-gray linoleum floor. He says, “Pretty okay. I still get bad at night but I think things are getting easier. I don’t know. I found somebody to talk to!”

“No, dude,” Sam, exasperated, replies, “Her name’s Jess. She’s super cool. She has, like, the first hundred numbers of pi memorized. How awesome is that? She’s been here for two months already, for anorexia stuff. She’s totally getting better. I think having friends helps. We look out for each other.”

Sam goes onto describe how he and Jess have made a pact that Sam will sit with her when she eats if she helps when he goes into withdrawal or has his night terrors. Sam blushes when he says the last part, and Dean teases him about it, but neither Dean nor Cas questions it. If Sam was getting into trouble, Dean would probably know by instinct.

They talk about Sam’s group meetings with other teenagers struggling with addiction, and he tells them that sometimes the meetings help a lot, while other times he gets so angry that they make him leave, all because the topic of conversation makes him itch for a fix. He sounds sad when he tells them this, but brightens when a blond girl approaches their table.

“Guys,” Sam grins widely, “This is Jessica Moore.”

“Hi,” Jess says, and gives a little wave before Sam motions that she should sit with them.
They find out that Jess is a little less than a year older than Sam and that she excels in math, and that she didn’t have a friend until Sam came. Under the table, she and Sam hold hands, awkwardly sweet to one another. Dean doesn’t tease though it’s clear that he wants to, and he even waits to interrogate Sam until Jess sees her family at the cafeteria doors and bids them goodbye with a nervous smile and a “nice to meet you.”

“So,” Dean says, “You guys a thing, or what?”

“Dean,” whines Sam.

“Hey, I just gotta make sure the lady’s treating my baby brother right,” he answers.

Sam wrinkles his nose and says, “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it yet. We hold hands sometimes though, and yesterday when I got bad, she, uh. She held me. And kissed my cheek.”

Dean smirks, “Sam and Jess, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-”

“Dean!” Sam complains, but they all break into laughter.

They remain at the center until visiting hours are up for the day, playing some card games together, a venture that Jess joins them in later. Sam hugs both Dean and Castiel when they say their goodbyes and promises under his breath that he’ll keep Dean posted on the Jess situation. Dean exclaims “Atta boy!” to this, and claps him on the shoulder.

When they sign out, they get their IDs back and pocket them. Dean remains silent until they make it back into the truck and says, “Seems like it’s going okay. Right?”

“I think so,” Castiel agrees, “It will take time, but if anybody can do it, it’s Sam.”

Dean murmurs, “Right,” with a glance at his feet before he starts the truck.

X

Castiel expects to be driven home, but instead he finds Dean taking them to Sugar Lane. When he asks what they’re doing, Dean just shakes his head and drives until they’re in front of the old Winchester trailer. No one has moved into the space to replace it, but as far as Castiel knows, Dean doesn’t pay rent to maintain its spot at the park.

“Why are we here?” asks Castiel.

“Want some alone time,” Dean says. He fumbles with his keys and opens the front door. The trailer creaks as they step inside, but as Dean flicks on the light, it’s clear that the trailer has been maintained even without the Winchesters living inside of it. The carpet has been vacuumed, the kitchen counters scrubbed down and the trash taken out. Some of the furniture has been rearranged.

“Huh,” Cas expresses.

“Yeah, I struck a deal with Bobby,” Dean replies, “When I hit eighteen in a couple a’ months I’m gonna move outta Mama’s and back here. It was supposed to be a surprise for Sammy to come with me, but who knows how long he’ll be in rehab for. Here, come see.”

Dean opens the door to what was his and Sam’s room, to reveal something entirely different. The metal-framed bunk bed is history, as well as Dean’s band posters and general mess. It’s neat as a pin, brand new standard-size bed in the far right corner with Sam’s posters framed and spaced out on the walls, and his trophies arranged on the dresser, from the elementary school spelling bee to a soccer
team participation award. A small desk sits crammed against the wall stocked with brand new notebooks and a mug of pens.

“This is gonna be Sammy’s room,” Dean explains, “He always did want his own space, you know? Thought I’d spruce it up a little before he saw it.”

Then Dean jerks his head back to the hallway, and follows Dean to the other bedroom, where John Winchester used to sleep. The familiar rock and car posters are taped to the wall, not framed as Sam’s are, but the bed is made and fitted with a Star Wars comforter and sheet set. Cas laughs softly and says, “You’re such a nerd.”

“Shut up,” Dean replies, nudging Cas in the side, “Pretty sweet setup though, huh?”

It’s very Dean, that’s for certain. His well-loved guitar rests against the wall, and his superhero action figure collection is set up on the chest of drawers across from his bed. It looks like he’s been moving into the bedroom piece by piece, and moving the remnants of John out.

“I like it,” Castiel decides.

“Good,” Dean replies. He cups Cas’ face and kisses him hard, just once before pulling away, but only to say, “Cause I was hoping we could break it in.” He winks, and Castiel chuckles. They surge together, lips on lips and arms tangled. Dean tastes so good, just like home. Cas backs him up onto the bed and crawls over Dean.

He lowers his body to grind against Dean, and they both moan softly at the bolt of sensation.

“Fuck yeah, baby,” Dean says, “Love it when you’re all dominant and shit.”

“Do you?”

“Oh, yeah.”

At that point, Castiel has no issue with taking control. He clamps his hands over each of Dean’s wrists and pins him down, rolling their hips together at a maddening, controlled pace. It takes all of his energy to maintain that control, but he does it, stony-eyed and panting. Dean wriggles underneath him, whining in his throat and trying desperately to clutch to something. Castiel holds him down.

“I want your clothes off,” he tells Dean, “All of them. Now.”

“I am yours to command,” Dean replies with a wiggle of his brows before he whips off his jacket. Clothing flies. Before Castiel can blink, Dean is naked and panting underneath him, laughing breathlessly and wiggling with every touch that Castiel grants him. Cas kisses him everywhere, from his scratchy, stubbled jaw to the freckled swells of his shoulders. He tongues along a nipple and Dean throws his head back with a gruff curse.

Castiel leans down and huffs against Dean’s ear, “Turn around. On your stomach.”

Dean doesn’t say a word, just moans a little and twists to obey.

Dean is perfect like this, Castiel thinks – on his hands and knees, ass in the air, trembling with anticipation and need. Castiel rubs his palms over one ass cheek and compliments, “Good God, you’re so gorgeous,” he spreads Dean apart with his hands, taking in the sight of that lovely, puckered ring of muscle, and comments, “Look at how needy you are,” he lowers his face and laps one long line across Dean’s hole.
“Fuck,” Dean says, eloquently.

“Would you like more?” Castiel asks, “You like the feeling of my tongue? Would you like me to eat you out?”

“Shit, yes, baby,” Dean breathes, and cants his ass back just a little, pleading.

Castiel grins and leans in for another taste. He starts by licking around Dean, not giving him quite what he wants but lapping on the outside just enough to make Dean squirm and swear under the attention. He whispers please, please, please, but Castiel doesn’t give in, not quite yet. It’s only when Dean starts to rut up against the mattress that he feels for him and decides to throw him a bone. He slides his tongue inside Dean, and Dean cries out, holding the comforter in two, tight fists.

“You like that?” Castiel breathes against Dean’s ass, “You like it when I lick you out?”

“Jesus, Cas, yes,” Dean groans, “Want your tongue, want your dick. God, I need you to fuck me so bad.”

“Of course you do,” Cas soothes, and runs a hand over Dean’s back, “Lube?”

Dean whines and scoots forward just enough to pull open the bedside table drawer and throw lube back at Cas.

“Condoms?”

“Don’t care,” Dean says, “I’m clean, want you to come inside me.”

Fuck. Why is that so hot? Castiel makes a choked noise in his throat at Dean’s confession and just nods, even though Dean is face down in the mattress and isn’t looking at him right now. Cas lubes up his fingers and, without ceremony, slides two directly into Dean. Dean spasms with surprise and then melts into a gut-wrenching, guttural groan.

“Baby, Cas, fuck, like that,” Dean chants out, “Fuck me with your fingers.”

Castiel takes his time opening Dean, driving them both insane as he does. He watches his fascination as Dean starts pumping his hips back to take more, shivers as Dean begs for another finger and claws at the sheets below him.

When he slicks himself up and sinks into Dean from behind, it’s heaven. There’s no other word for the sensation around his cock, the heat and tightness swallowing him whole. Dean is pliant and pleading underneath him, encouraging to fuck harder, move faster, even though they’ve only just begun.

With a heave, Castiel pulls Dean’s legs up and plows into him. Dean seems to love being manhandled, having his legs pulled farther apart and Castiel’s cock pumping in and out of him while all he can do is clutch at the bedding and whine and curse and cry out. It’s the most beautiful thing that Castiel has ever seen, Dean opened up around his cock while he groans into the mattress, and the little pushes back when Dean is greedy for more of Cas’ cock.

“God, fuck yes, baby,” Dean says. He encourages Cas with filthy little narrations, moaning out you like fucking my ass, baby? and tight for you Cas, just for you, or pound me, go harder, fuck me ’til I can’t move.

One last clench of Dean around him and Castiel comes with a force, slamming inside Dean and pinning him down to come inside him.
When he reaches around to bring Dean off, too, Castiel is surprised to find that Dean’s cock is soft and sticky, that he’s come untouched onto his Star Wars comforter.

“Holy shit,” Castiel murmurs.

“I know,” Dean mumbles, clearly still riding the high of his orgasm, “That was awesome.”

Castiel doesn’t pull out right away. Instead, he settles on top of Dean in a heap, soft cock trapped in his ass and pleasantly warm. It’s there that his stomach growls, and he’s forced to whine and ask, “Do you have food here?”

“Yeah, some,” Dean says, and he’s the one that pulls out of their tangle at last, rolling onto his back so that they’re face to face. He pops his neck and says, “Want me to make you some Kraft Mac n’ Cheese and we can watch movies naked?”

“Why, Dean,” Castiel laughs, “That’s the romantic thing that has ever been said to me.”

The day at court is surprisingly quiet.

Castiel wears a button-up shirt and a blue tie, attempting to comb his hair into submission and failing miserably.

There, Cas gets asked a lot of questions about Missouri, and he answers each in turn politely. He’s gotten the spiel before, the interrogation to make sure a parent is fit. He does everything he can to assure them that Mama Missouri never did anything to warrant his bad behavior, that he acted on his own provoked only by his anger at Principal Milton.

The judge grants Missouri custody.

Everyone told Castiel that it would be easy and that this is what would happen. He didn’t realize that they were right, or how scared he’d been that they might be wrong. He hugs Mama hard and his eyes leak when she hugs back.

“I love you, Mama,” he says just outside the courtroom.

“And I love you, my little angel,” she says, smile wide.

The adoption gets handled smoothly. Everyone involved is ecstatic, some under the mistaken impression that Missouri is doing some kind of public service by taking a troubled teenager under her wing.

It doesn’t occur to Castiel that it’s all real until he and Missouri are in the van on the way back to Sugar Lane, where he’s started to unpack his things for the second time at Missouri’s homes.

Today, Castiel isn’t a troubled teenager being jerked around by the government.

Today, Castiel is a son coming home to his family.
Christmas morning finds Castiel, instead of beside a tree and a pool of smartly wrapped presents, in the back of Bobby’s truck heading toward the rehab center to visit Sam. Ellen tunes the radio station to something playing Christmas carols that Jo sings along to under her breath. Dean is quiet, but not in an uncomfortable way. It’s a contemplative sort of quiet, pleasant and affectionate. When Dean catches Cas’ eye, he smiles just a little, and Castiel smiles back.

The outside of the rehab center looks unchanged from when they last visited a couple weeks ago, but the inside looks like the holiday exploded all over it. A Christmas tree stands proud and tall in the lobby, decorated with white lights and paper snowflakes, and ornaments handmade by the patients at the center.

The desk attendant (wearing a pair of reindeer antlers affixed to a headband) waves them through without taking their IDs, and they head toward the cafeteria. The room is as festive as the lobby, with paper snowflakes hung from the ceiling on silver segments of yarn, wreaths mounted on the walls, and a second Christmas tree demurely idling in the corner.

As soon as he sees them, Sam runs and throws his arms around Dean. He looks about a foot taller, gawky and awkward in his long limbs, his body stretched tall like pulled taffy. But he also looks much better than he has in quite some time, with color in his face and renewed sparkle to his eyes.

“Merry Christmas, Sammy,” Dean grins, and claps his brother on his back, “How’s it going?”

Sam shrugs, “Okay. You didn’t all have to come,” he turns to the rest of them.

Bobby folds his arms over his chest and says, “A’course we did, y’idjit. Wouldn’t be Christmas without you.”

Sam looks like he might cry at that, but instead he just hugs Bobby as close and tight as he did Dean, moving onto Ellen and Jo in turn, and then at last Castiel. Sam cocks his head and asks, “Why aren’t you celebrating with Mama and everyone?”

“I see them every day,” Castiel reasons, “and you’re my family too.”

Sam wraps his arms tight around Castiel and Cas hugs back, happier to be here with Sam than he could have possibly been anyplace else in the world. Together, they all mill to the buffet table of Christmas breakfast items, loading up Styrofoam cafeteria platters with boxes of orange juice, strips of bacon, and tightly curled cinnamon rolls doused in frosting that drips down the sides.

Excitedly, Sam relays to all of them how much better things have been going. He still gets hit by cravings sometimes, but not like he used to, not cravings so bad that he’d start to quake and cry because the need was too much.

“I wish I could be home for Christmas, though,” Sam sighs, setting his plastic fork down alongside his eggs.
“Eh, you wouldn’t be missing much,” Dean says, “We’re all here, aren’t we? Plus this food ain’t half bad.” He bites into a bit of bacon and smiles through the food, for which both Sam and Bobby elbow him.

When they all finish their food, they continue the visit with full bellies and smiles on their faces. That’s when Castiel pulls out his package for Sam, a thin present wrapped with green Rudolph the Reindeer paper. He passes it to Sam and says, “It isn’t much, but I thought you might like to have it while you’re still here.”

Sam carefully peels away the wrapping paper and pulls out the drawing that Castiel slid into a plastic sleeve. It’s a drawing of Sam and Dean together, decked with angel wings. He gnaws on his lower lip, nervously tugging at the skin as Sam sweeps his eyes over the sketch.

“Shit, Cas,” Sam says, and grins wide, “It’s amazing. Thank you.”

Sam places the drawing on the table with gentle hands and reaches over to pull Castiel into another embrace. This time, he holds him longer, and Cas holds him back, running his palm over the ridges of Sam’s skinny spine.

“Thanks,” Sam says, “I mean it.”

Underneath bone and muscle, Castiel’s heart pumps out a fresh round of blood. But more than that, his heart feels warm. Warm beyond the broken walls around it, warm inside the chambers and in his bloodstream, like something beyond the physical and practical rests on each of his cells, travels through his body, and makes him feel that particular feeling that his brain supplies is called home.

X

“You don’t have to come with me,” Dean says, when they all arrive back at Sugar Lane, inspired the rehab center’s Christmas breakfast and their visit with Sam. Seeing Sam with old wonder back in his eyes makes Castiel’s gut leap with hope for the better – if Sam can heal, then so can they.

And if they can heal, that means he can deal with accompanying Dean on a visit to John Winchester in prison. It’s Christmas, and he loves Dean, and Dean loves his dad. Castiel may not understand that, but he at least understands that Dean needs Cas at his side, even if he insists that it’s okay if Castiel doesn’t come.

Dean asked him a week ago if he would go on Dean’s Christmas visit to the prison. At first Castiel told Dean that he didn’t know how wise that would be, and doesn’t Dean remember the time that John invited him over to dinner? But after they argued and parted ways, Castiel’s anger eased. He recalled Dean being there when Mama Missouri brought Castiel home as her son – legally – and how exciting and overwhelming the support was.

How wonderful it would be if he could give Dean that same feeling, he thought.

So as Dean hesitates with the keys of the crappy truck he has on loan from Bobby, Castiel just smiles and shakes his head. He says, “I’m not going to change my mind, Dean. I want to come with you.”

Dean looks Cas over and gruffly says, “C’mere, you son of a gun,” and yanks Cas into a long, lingering hug. He leans into Cas’ neck and kisses the skin right above the collar of his wool pea coat, moving his lips up to below the shell of his ear, the blade of his jaw and then at last to his lips, softly pressing. Underneath the attention, Castiel’s mouth opens, and he lets Dean explore his mouth. He wraps his arms around Dean’s neck and kisses him back, body content and humming.

When they break apart, Dean laughs and says, “We should probably get going. If we keep it up, I’m
gonna wanna visit my bed instead.” He wiggles his eyebrows and Castiel shoulders at his arm, though he can’t help but chuckle back.

With the heat in the truck on-and-off functional, they decide to bundle up in knit scarves and hats and gloves that Missouri made for them as Christmas gifts. Dean and Cas each hug Mama before they leave, Cas administering a kiss to her cheek and both of them wishing her a Merry Christmas.

“You boys be careful on the road,” she says, “Weatherman says it’s supposed to snow in an hour or so.”

“We will, Mama,” promises Dean.

“And be back for supper,” she adds, “Don’t wanna miss all the goodies Gabriel and I got planned.”

They promise not to be late for Christmas dinner at least three times and hug once more before Mama Missouri lets them go trudging out into the cool December air. The truck is freezing when they climb inside. Castiel pulls his coat around his shoulders more tightly and Dean teases him for being a ‘wimp.’

It’s pleasant drive to the prison, though a long one, narrated by the sounds of Led Zeppelin. Dean turns up the volume when the track shifts to Ramble On, and grins over at Cas as he sings along. When they stop at a red light, he mimes playing his guitar and belts out the lyrics, each one the same until toward the end:

“T’was in the darkest depths of Mordor, I met a girl so fair...”

Dean looks Cas dead in the eye and sings, “Met a dude so fair,” in its place. Instead of laughing, they just grin like idiots at each other for an entire mile, even long after the song has ended and another takes its place. The warmth keeps thrumming through Castiel’s body, even though the truck’s heat has yet to turn on.

It does start to snow as they close in on the prison. It isn’t a flurry, just tiny little flakes that flutter down all around the truck. A fine film of it covers the ground as the park in the lot outside the prison, enough to make the asphalt slippery beneath the truck’s well-worn tires, but not quite gathered beyond seeing the lines between parking spaces.

When Castiel and Dean climb out, Dean curls an arm around Cas’ waist and draws him in for a kiss. It isn’t as playful as kisses shared earlier in the day, but Dean needs it, needs the courage that courses through a person when somebody that they love stands with them.

John Winchester is confined in a minimum security prison, a place for first time offenders and non-dangerous criminals. It doesn’t have concrete walls on the outside like prisons in the movies or on television, just a simple chain link fence topped with curls of barbed wire along the perimeter. Dean explains on the way inside that you don’t have to speak through a Plexiglas wall on a telephone, either, that visiting John is actually similar to paying a visit to Sam – they sit at tables and chat, and beyond the garish prison uniforms and the security guards stationed around the room, they can play at normalcy for a little.

Judging by the mostly full lot outside, they aren’t the only family members that have decided to pay a visit. A security guard manning the front desk beyond a glass wall asks for their IDs, and Castiel and Dean give them.

“Here to see John Winchester, right?” the guard asks.

Dean nods.
“All right, boys, come on through,” the guard waves them through a metal detector, confiscating Dean’s pocket knife before they’re allowed to pass into the visitor’s area.

John looks surprised when he spots them. Prison appears to have done some good for him, if the relaxation of the lines in his face are anything to go by. The orange prison jumpsuit does wash him out, but he looks different – less angry, perhaps.

“Where’s Sam?” he asks as they sit.

Has Dean really not told him? Castiel glances over and waits for Dean to say something.

“He’s still in rehab, dad,” Dean says carefully.

“Really?” John asks, “After all this time? Jesus.”

Dean looks like he really wants to roll his eyes. He just sighs instead, folding his hands together on table laminate. He says, “Yeah, dad, heroin’s not really the kind of thing that you magically recover from,” pausing at the tone of rudeness in his own voice, Dean continues, “but he thinks he’ll get released soon. He’s gettin’ better, a whole lot better. Doesn’t have nightmares much anymore, only really gets the shakes from time to time, he says.”

“Damn kid,” mutters John with a shake of his head.

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Castiel says before he can censor himself.

John raises his brows, “What the hell are you doin’ here, boy? Thought you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t,” Castiel says, “but Dean asked if I would come, and so I have.”

“You still doin’ your art thing?” John asks.

“Never stopped,” Castiel replies.

“Hm.”

The noise doesn’t signify approval, but it’s better than an all-out throw down, like he and John Winchester have had before.

“I’m gonna move back into the trailer,” Dean says, “Next month, when I’m eighteen.”

John glances up and says, “Really? Bobby kept the old thing around?”

“Yeah, me n’ him made a deal,” Dean says, “I mean, I changed stuff around some, but I don’t wanna leave Sugar Lane. It’s kinda home.”

John levels a gaze at Castiel and asks, “You movin’ in with him, kid?”

Cas shrugs, “I can’t, at least not right away. I’m still a minor. But I think maybe I’d like to, eventually. I’ve gotten used to living with Dean, with him at Mama’s and all.”

John’s face sours and he asks, “That a jab at my parenting?”

“No,” Castiel answers, and it wasn’t, really. He could make plenty of direct jabs at John’s chosen methods of fatherhood, doesn’t need to be subtle, but he wouldn’t do that in front of Dean. Dean loves his dad, and so Castiel will tolerate him as necessary.
“Good,” John says, “Because your Missouri may be the one that my boys are living with, but that
don’t make her squat to them. I am their father.”

Castiel makes a face. He says, “You seem to have a high opinion of yourself, sir. That you would
feel comfortable in comparing yourself to Missouri says a great deal.”

“Cas,” Dean warns.

“What?” Castiel replies, “Mama makes sure you have food in your stomach every night, made sure
Sam went to a good rehabilitation center, makes sure you have Christmas presents to open. And she
sure as hell never hit you. I’m just saying. You love your dad. I get that. But that doesn’t make him
good at what he does.”

“Now you listen to me,” John interjects, “I don’t know where you get off tellin’ me how to raise my
boys, Little Orphan Annie.”

“Mama adopted me. Try again.”

“Oh, you shut your mouth,” John says, “You’re just some kid. You may have known Dean for a
couple a’ years, sure, but I was there when he was born. He’s my son, and blood will always be
thicker than water. He’ll get tired of you, just like he tires out of all his little friends.”

“The proverb you’re misusing is actually ‘The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the
womb,’” Castiel says.

Dean slams his fist down on the table. A security guard eyes them, and he lets his fingers ease apart.
He says, “Will both of you fucking stop it? Dad, you – I’m always gonna give a shit about you, but
Cas has got some crap right. You messed me up. You messed Sam up. Hell, you messed up, period.
I’m never gonna be good enough for you, and that used to dig at me. But you know what? I’m
friggin’ happy now. And being happy is gonna include Cas for a long-ass time. Shit, if you get over
whatever it is that makes you hate his guts, maybe you’ll come to the courthouse and watch us tie the
knot someday. Better get used to him, ’cause he’s here to stay.”

Inside his chest, Castiel’s heart speeds up. He blinks over at Dean, squinting, and cocks his head.

“You’d have to get me a ring first.”

“I will, baby.”

“He’s a gold digger, Dean, you see that?” grumbles John.

“Nah, he has to get me a ring too,” Dean says, and reaches across the table to fold Cas’ hand within
his own, “I’m not that easy.”

“You are kind of easy,” Castiel jokes.

Dean laughs, “Yeah, I am,” and then exhales, “Look, dad. I used to give a damn what you thought
of me, but I don’t anymore. You’re locked up here, and I’m out being better than I’ve ever been
before. Maybe when you get out of here you can get in on that.”

John looks furious and dismayed all at once after that, and snaps at both of them to get out. Dean just
shrugs and complies, dragging Cas away before he and John can dive back into another argument.
They return their IDs and Dean’s pocketknife to him at the front, both of which Dean sticks into the
pocket of his jeans before he wraps an arm around Cas’ shoulders and kisses his cheek.
“Are you all right?” Castiel asks, as they walk back out toward the truck.

“Yeah,” Dean says. He tilts his face up at the gray-white clouds, snowflakes tangling in his long lashes as he stares. A gentle smile lifts the corners of his lips when he turns back to Castiel, and he says, “You know what? Yeah, I am all right. I’m more than all right. He’s never gonna be satisfied with me, and man, that pisses me off but…like, I’m okay with it now, I guess. I’ve got a million folks backin’ me up now. Got Sam and Bobby and Mama and you.”

He pauses, takes a breath, and continues, “And…I’ve got me. I didn’t think I was enough, but fuck that, I am. I’m more than enough, and so what if my dad isn’t satisfied with who I am? I’m satisfied with myself.”

On that note, they clamber back into the truck, chins high and shoulders back, a burden lifted from them with those few words. Led Zeppelin begins to play as Dean turns the key in the ignition and the truck sputters to life.

Dean’s satisfied with himself, and at that declaration Castiel has a realization of his own: He’s satisfied with himself, too.

X

It ends with a birthday.

On January twenty fourth, Dean and Castiel drive the truck together to the rehab center and checks Sam out officially. When they walk out to the dirty, slushy parking lot and Dean loads Sam’s small suitcase of belongings into the back, Sam asks, “Where’s the Impala?”

“Me n’ Bobby are still workin’ on rebuilding her,” Dean says, “But she’s starting to look like her old gorgeous self again. I’ll show you once we get you all settled again.”

It’s good to see Sam dressed back in a t-shirt and jeans, though now his jeans are far too short in the ankle, and his t-shirt looks a little pained trying to stretch across the breadth of Sam’s shoulders. He’ll need a new coat. The wool jacket that Dean brought along doesn’t fit over Sam’s new, wide shoulders and won’t reach over his wrists. At the rate that Sam is going, he’ll dwarf Castiel and Dean’s heights within a year or two – no longer the little one.

They pull away from the rehab center with Sam looking behind at the building until it disappears from sight.

“You okay, Sammy?” asks Dean.

Sam glances back to them and says, “I think so. I just hope I can do this on my own.”

“You’re not on your own, idiot,” Dean says.

Sam snorts and rolls his eyes, but nobody misses the smile that he tries to hide. The tension dissolves when Dean relents and lets Sam choose what tape to listen to. He chooses Queen, and the three of them sing along together all the way back to Sugar Lane.

There, Sam makes a noise of confusion when Dean turns into the park and rolls straight past Mama Missouri’s house. They stop the truck, instead, in front of the old Winchester trailer, the place that Dean lives in as of today, and the home that he and Cas always sneak to when they want to be intimate. Sam blinks between Dean and Castiel each and says, “What are you doing? We don’t live here anymore, dumbass.”
“Hey,” Dean says, “Just trust me, dude. You’ll like this. Leave the suitcase in the back, though.”

Together, they tramp up to the front door, Castiel hanging back with Sam as Dean fumbles with the keys. Sam mutters, “Do you know what the hell is going on?” at Castiel, and Cas smiles.

“Just go with it,” he says.

A bark of excitement greets them when they pile through the doorway, and only a second after the front door to the trailer closes behind them, Dean gets tackled by the enormous ball of fur and energy that is Sam’s surprise – one of them, at least.

“Dean, do we have a dog?” he asks, mouth going slack with equal parts surprise and pleasure.

Dean’s grin spreads from ear to ear, and he commands, “Bones, sit.”

Bones does indeed sit, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

“Adopted him just yesterday,” Dean says, “Cas helped me pick him out for us. Let him smell your hand, Sammy.”

Eagerly, Sam kneels in front of the chocolate brown dog and holds out a tentative hand in front of his nose. Bones snuffles over Sam’s palm for a few seconds and then wags his tail with even more enthusiasm, turning to place his paws on Sam’s legs so he can lick his face. Sam belts out a loud note of laughter and says, “Bones! Bones, down!”

The dog obeys, and Sam scratches behind his ears before he looks up at his brother and says, “For real, Dean? Do we really get to keep him?”

“All ours,” Dean says, licking his lips and biting back a smile. He pauses for a beat, letting Sam stroke over Bones’ brown, furry back, rubbing his pink belly and giving him another affectionate scratch behind the ears. Bones steps up to nuzzle at Sam again and Sam loosely hugs him, not wanting to scare him off.

Dean clears his throat, “Got something else to show you.”

Sam stands and follows Dean. Cas lingers back behind them and watches as Dean opens the bedroom door for Sam, showing off the new little space made up just for him.

“Is this –” Sam turns around with his brows drawn together, “Is this mine? Are you serious? Is any of this real? Jesus.” He bowls into the bedroom and looks over the walls, at his old posters and trophies and ribbons all set up like this room never belonged to anybody but Sam Winchester. He runs his knobbly hand along the bedspread of the new, big bed, better suited to a growing teenage boy than a twin mattress set in a rickety, metal-framed bunk.

Bones pads in behind Sam and leaps onto the bed, settling down and curling up with a hopeful look in his wide, watery canine eyes.

“Do we really get to live here?” breathes Sam.

Dean runs his fingers back through his hair and says, “Yeah. I mean, we got some stuff we gotta do first. I talked to Bela about what it would take to get custody, and she thinks we could pull it off, since I got a full-time gig and I’m paying rent for this beauty starting today.”

“Wow,” Sam says, and slides his gaze back to the bedroom, over his little desk and the decorations of scientist posters and prints of classic book covers. On the dresser sits Castiel’s old drawing of a
younger Sam, the one that used to be framed in the living room.

“Hang on,” Sam says, “It’s missing one thing.”

Cas and Dean exchange a glance and follow Sam back out into the living room and then out of the trailer entirely. Sam scrambles up into the bed of the truck and rummages through his tiny rolling suitcase of belongings, tossing a few articles of clothing aside before he finds what he’s looking for. He clutches it to his chest and pushes past them.

Back in the bedroom, Sam smooths out a plastic-covered drawing – himself and Dean with angel wings. It’s a little more wrinkled and well-worn than it was on Christmas day at the rehab center, but it’s clear that Sam has taken care of it. He props it up against the wall, right beside the older sketch of his rounder, younger face.

“There,” Sam says, “Much better.”

“Needs a picture of Cas or somethin’, huh?” Dean says.

Castiel glances down at the floor at that, but Dean leans over and cups Cas’ chin in his palm, pushing his eyes up so that their gazes meet. He says, “Hey, don’t do that. You’re our family too.”

“Yeah?” Cas says softly.

“Yeah,” Dean says.

Sam turns to them with a crease in his brow and asks, “You really think you’ll get custody of me?”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Dean replies. He steps forward, tugging Cas along with him, into the bedroom. He ropes each of them in with an arm around their shoulders, ruffling Sam’s mop of uncut hair before he turns to smile at Castiel. He leans in and places a gentle, lingering kiss at the center of his forehead.

“No matter what happens,” Dean says to them, “I got my family.”

Dean’s arms tighten around both of them, even as Sam tries to wriggle out of the grip. They laugh, and Dean and Castiel share one, final glance before he thinks that what Dean says is true: No matter what happens, no matter what obstacles are to come or what flaws there will be in the fabric, no matter how scared he is that things won’t always be as they are in this moment, he does have one thing.

He has his family.

The End

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your support, guys! I had a lot of fun writing this fic, and I hope everybody will be back for more fics in the future (I have a couple of fun ones up my sleeve!). Just a reminder that if you want to follow me on tumblr, my SPN blog is scarlettofletters.tumblr, though you can find my main blog at scarlettshazam.tumblr (that one is mostly sci-fi and pulp, though I do sometimes put SPN posts there).
Lots of love to you all!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!