Moving to Lawrence with his family is the most significant event of Dean Winchester's life. It brings a stability he's never known, and the only thing to have more of a profound impact on him is Castiel Novak: the two boys become fast friends the day they meet. But as Dean grows older, he dreams for something beyond the monotony and constraints of suburbia, and he is haunted by the inexplicable feeling that he was born for something more than what this life offers. As he struggles to reconcile the person he yearns to be with what his family and friends expect of him, a fateful choice exposes just how fragile his life in the suburbs is, and possibly risks losing the best friend he's ever had.

Written for deancasbigbang. The inspiration for this story belongs to Arcade Fire's The Suburbs, hence the song lyrics at the beginning of each chapter. With a few exceptions, all lyrics are from songs on that album. This story is what happens when I drive by two beautiful boys kicking a soccer ball between them, while listening to nostalgic, emo music.

The depth of my gratitude is endless for my beta, zatnikatel, whose encouragement and guidance keep me honest. And a special thanks to those who encouraged me to keep writing this beast when I doubted myself. Your faith in me is the reason this story is complete.

Last, but not least, thank you to the brilliantly talented casamancy for her gorgeous artwork, as well as her patience with my inability to send her anything of substance until the very last minute. I was so thrilled to have you as my artist this year!
Suburban War

*Oh those hours, we used to know*
Spent the summer starin' out the window
The wind it takes you where it wants to go

~Arcade Fire, “Wasted Hours”

**Ten years old**

Two of the most significant moments of Dean Winchester’s childhood coincidentally happen on the same day.

That day begins early, as the Winchester family pile into their beloved Impala, Dean and his little brother both still half-asleep, eyes barely cracked open as they crawl into the backseat. The sun hasn’t even made an appearance yet, but Dean knows by the shade of the pre-dawn sky that it won’t be long before they’ll be squinting away at the harsh brightness of the morning’s rays.

He slots himself into place and closes his eyes, wanting to fall back into slumber despite the excitement he feels over what the day promises. He sighs and smiles slightly when he hears his mom reach into the car, tucking Sammy in and covering him with a blanket. When he feels her warm hands tucking his own blanket around his shoulders and soft lips kissing his cheek, he stays awake long enough to murmur, “Thanks, mom,” before drifting into a deep sleep.

When he wakes, it’s to glaring sunshine and a rush of air as his Dad rolls down the driver’s side window. Dean scoots up in his seat to take a peek, and rubs the sleep out of his eyes as he stares at the landscape rushing past. As many different places as he’s lived in his short life, seeing miles upon miles of tall grass swaying in the wind shouldn’t make much of an impression on him, but it does. It’s one thing to move to a new place knowing you probably won’t be there for more than a few months or a year at time – you don’t let yourself get attached to your surroundings.

But this time, this move, is for real. This is the place where Dean and Sammy are meant to grow up. Or at least that’s what Mom and Dad keep saying, and Dean’s pretty sure they must be telling the truth because dad quit the Marines and everything, and that’s something Dean thought he wouldn’t ever do.

He leans his forehead on the window, breathing in the scent of grass and ozone, the air dry and warm with the promise of a sweltering summer. He can hear Mom and Dad murmuring to each other, but the wind and the rumble of the Impala’s engine make their words indecipherable. He feels Sam begin to stir across the seat next to him, and looks up in time to catch Dad staring at him in the rearview mirror.

“Shouldn’t be too long before we’re there,” Dad raises his voice enough for Dean to hear. Mom looks over her shoulder to smile at Dean, mouths *morning, honey*, as she battles with wisps of her hair flying loose from its ponytail in the current of air flowing between the windows.

“I’m hungry,” Sammy whines, and Dean reaches down to pull a peanut butter and jelly sandwich out of his knapsack before his baby brother is even finished saying the words. Mom stares back at
Dean fondly as his dad leans forward to turn up the volume on the stereo. “Lord, I was born a ramblin’ man,” Dad sings along to the music, loud and off-key, and he stares back at Dean through the rear view with a smile on his face. Dean grins back at him. He always likes it when Dad sings along to music; it means he’s happy. Sometimes Dean worries why he doesn’t do it so much, but he tells himself that maybe it’s just because his dad doesn’t hear a lot of songs that make him feel like singing.

“Pay attention to this moment, Deano,” Dad calls back at him over the music and the roar of the wind. “For men like you and me, sometimes all we need in life is good tunes, a good car, and an open road.”

He winks at Dean in the mirror before turning his attention back to the road ahead. Dean puffs his chest out a little and straightens his back, feeling prouder and happier than he’s felt in a long time because his dad called him a man, a man just like him. He takes another deep breath, looks over the front seat to the asphalt speeding towards them through the windshield, and listens to the fading lyrics of the song…

*And when it’s time for leavin’, I hope you’ll understand, I was born a ramblin’ man…*

They arrive in Lawrence early that afternoon. Dean and Sam watch the landscape change from fields of swaying wheat and corn crops to boxy strip malls and cookie-cutter houses with square, green lawns that are so bright they look fake. Dad slows the car down as they get closer to their neighborhood, a suburb just outside of Lawrence proper.

“How the hell are we supposed to even be able to remember which house is ours?” Dad grumbles from the front seat. “They all look the same.”

Dean hears his mom sigh. “The homes are fine. Better than anything we had before. And you’ve no place to talk about the houses all looking the same, given the way it is on every base we lived on.”

John snorts. “Yeah, well at least military had an excuse for making carbon-copy houses. Plus, nobody pretended it was better than what it was. We all knew shit was shit.”

“Language, John,” Mary mutters, looking back over her shoulder to see if Dean and Sam are paying attention.

A few minutes later, they pull up to the curb of a yellow house with a moving truck in the driveway, and “Home sweet home!” Mary exclaims.

Sammy bounces in his seat, screams “I have to PEE!” at the top of his lungs, as Dean scrambles out of the backseat and runs to stand in the front yard, stopping to stare at their new home. Dad was right, he thinks. All these houses do look the same. But he stops that train of thought as soon as he sees one of the mover guys pulling his bike out of the back of the van. He runs over to grab it from him, excited at the prospect of riding around the neighborhood, but Dad’s voice makes him stop in his tracks.

“Son, you’re not riding off on your bike until we’ve got everything unpacked, you hear?” John says as he picks up a box and turns to walk into the house.

Dean can’t hold back his scowl, but he fires back his, “Yes, sir,” with military precision, and doesn’t hesitate to stoop and pick up a box of his own to carry.
They work diligently for an hour, helping the hired movers finish unloading the last of the boxes so that they can bid them goodbye and get busy unpacking. Mary makes a point to unpack some of Sammy’s toys first so that he’ll be occupied and out of the way. Dean spares a glance at his little brother, resenting the fact that just because he’s six years old and cute he gets out of doing any work.

He sidles over to the open window to get a taste of the late spring breeze. They have no power in the house yet, so with the afternoon sun beating down it makes the air stuffy and stale. He hears his mom sigh behind him.

“Sweetie, would you like to do me a huge favor?”

Dean turns to face her. “Yes, ma’am,” he says reluctantly, expecting another chore to be added to his list of things to do before he can get away.

Mary sets down the box she was unpacking and walks over to Dean. Her eyes are warm and soft as she looks down at him, fingers brushing the hair off his forehead. “Your dad and I forgot to check if that playground two streets over has monkey bars, and you know how much Sammy loves those. I’m sure he’ll be wanting to go out and play tomorrow, so it would be a big help if you could take your bike and check that playground out a bit more thoroughly.”

Freedom so close he can taste it, Dean hesitates, honor-bound to fess up to Dad’s command. “But, uh, Dad said I couldn’t go out until I’d helped unpack everything.”

Mary leans down to place a kiss on his forehead. “You let me worry about Dad. This is official Sammy business, after all.”

Dean wraps his arms around his mom’s waist and buries his head against her stomach, hugging her tightly. He’s always loved his mom fiercely, but ever since that scary morning a year ago when he found her alone in their kitchen, crying over the fact Dad hadn’t been home in weeks, he’s felt a responsibility and protectiveness that would probably be overwhelming for any other ten year old. He’d felt her body shaking with sobs as he hugged her much like today, and whispered It’s gonna be okay, Mom, swearing to himself that he’d do whatever it took to keep his mom from being that sad again.

“Thanks, Mom,” he whispers, glancing up at her before pulling away.

She straightens the sleeves of his t-shirt and rubs his back. “You’re welcome, honey. Just remember to look out for cars, stay on the route we showed you when we drove in, and be home before dark.”

He turns to run out the door, yelling over his shoulder as he pulls open the screen, “Will do!”

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Dean’s never admitted this to anyone, at least not after that jerk at the last school he went to made fun of him, but he loves to pretend he’s an explorer. It’s not a hard thing to imagine, especially since they’ve moved probably at least once a year for all of Dean’s life, and every time they find themselves in a new place he has to scope out the surroundings.

He figured out early on that the best way to deal with moving so much is to make it an adventure. Especially since a lot of times the kids he encounters in new places can be mean or not cool, and more often than not he ends up not having many friends. It’s not a big deal being a loner; a lot of times it’s better, because that way he doesn’t really miss anybody when they have to move again.
Probably the main thing he doesn’t like about it is he feels he has to lie to his mom when they end up in a place where he doesn’t make friends. She’d worry if she knew he didn’t have anybody, so when he’s off riding his bike and pretending he’s discovering new territory or escaping from bad guys or monsters, Dean just tells her he met up with friends and played on a playground or something.

This place they’ve moved to in Lawrence looks better than most places they’ve lived, he’s relieved to discover. It’s not hard to be better than military bases, but Dean had still been worried, since it’s Kansas and the middle of freaking nowhere, or so he’d heard his dad say to his mom late one night. But the trees are tall and worthy of climbing, the streets are wide and amenable to a good game of hockey, and the birds are singing, so it’s looking to be a good start to his new life here.

He only loses his way for a moment before he finds the playground Mom and Dad had shown them on the way to their new home. It’s a cool looking playground too, with at least four different kinds of slides and five swing sets. Sammy will probably pee his pants from excitement when he sees the kick-ass monkey bars hidden behind the slides, and Dean is about to throw his bike down to run over and climb them, but he spots a kid about his size heading over from across the street to the swings.

There are no other kids on the playground, and Dean would feel kind of funny just approaching out of the blue without scoping the guy out first, so he changes his path to look in the windows of the stores across the street. He pauses in front of the window of the drug store, pretends to read over the ads for aspirin and bandaids as he watches the kid in the reflection of the window.

The dude’s probably around Dean’s age, he’s guessing, since he’s about the same size. He’s got dark, messy hair, and his shirt is actually tucked into his shorts, which is kind of nerdy, but who is Dean to judge. The kid keeps glancing across the street in Dean’s direction, swinging slowly and kicking his feet in the dirt on each downswing. Dean chews on his lip, wondering if he should cross the street and see if the guy seems friendly enough to hang out, but his thoughts get interrupted by a man in a dark suit approaching the book shop two doors down. Dean wouldn’t think anything of him, except the man has the biggest dog he’s ever seen. Dean half-wonders if it’s even a dog, thinking maybe it’s a wolf or even a horse or something. Its head is at least twice the size of Dean’s own, and its back comes up to Dean’s shoulders.

The man ties the dog’s chain to a bike stand, and strolls inside the book shop, whistling to himself. Dean can’t take his eyes off the dog, and the messy-headed kid across the street is completely forgotten. The beast’s hair is thick and black, with tan around his face and feet. He doesn’t seem to have a tail, but Dean isn’t sure because the dog is sitting down, staring into the window of the store, drool hanging off his jowls in thick, wet strings. Dean’s feet seem to have a mind of their own, shuffling towards the dog, one slow step at a time.

The scuffling movement grabs the dog’s attention, and it turns its head towards him. Dean freezes, waiting to see if the dog will bark or growl at him, but all it does is lick its lips and whine, a curious look in its eyes. Dean thinks that maybe that’s a sign the dog is nice. Surely a man wouldn’t leave a mean dog tied up outside in public where just anyone could walk up to it, right? It doesn’t occur to Dean until later that maybe the owner figured most sane people had a healthy sense of self-preservation and would keep away from the hound.

He continues his slow trek towards the dog, hypnotized by its dark, beady eyes and rapid panting. When he gets within a couple feet of it he stops, and both he and the dog seem to hold their breath, waiting to see what happens next. Emboldened by the dog’s seeming lack of aggression, Dean slowly lifts his hand, reaching towards the dog and whispering, “Good doggie, good boy, good—”
He yelps when he feels a hand grab his upper arm, pulling him back and throwing him on the ground and away, just as the dog barks and lunges forward, jaws clapping shut as it tries and fails to reach Dean. Dean cries out when the back of his skull bounces against the sidewalk, and everything turns to black.

When Dean opens his eyes, he’s forgotten for a moment where he is or why he’s there. He stares up at the deep blue sky, blinking a few times as he watches fluffy, fat clouds skid across his view. He hears birdsong, and the rustle of leaves in a tree somewhere close by. At the same time he becomes aware of how much his head hurts, a face leans over him, blocking out the sky.

The boy that had been across the street just moments ago now stares down at Dean. “We need to talk,” he announces.

Dean’s head hurts so much, and the fall must have knocked the breath out of him because he can’t seem to catch it or focus on anything other than how blue this kid’s eyes are, so blue that he thinks absurdly that the sky must be jealous. But he finally manages to squeeze out, “Who are you?”

Dean hears himself say the words, and he feels those words hang between the two of them, and he knows this could be a make-or-break moment for his life in this new town. For all Dean knows, this Castiel guy could be the king of the kids in this neighborhood, and if he thinks Dean is weird and goes off and blabs what he just said to everyone, then Dean can kiss away any chance of having a decent reputation around here.

Castiel leans back on his haunches and chews on his lip. “Why did you say that?” he asks, head tilted as he studies Dean.

Dean can feel himself blushing, and silently berates himself for letting this get to him. “Uh, because your eyes are really blue like the sky. Why else would I say it, dummy?”

The boy smiles slightly and nods to himself, taking a deep breath in what seems to be relief. “I thought you might have a concussion, since you hit your head so bad,” he says solemnly.

“Your cousins sound like assholes.”

The boy huffs, shaking his head as he brushes gravel off his palm. “No, but my dad is. And sometimes my cousins can be jerks, so I know about getting concussions when you hit your head.”

The boy’s head snaps up, his eyes going wide at Dean's cussing, and Dean silently congratulates himself on getting the upper hand again.

“Do you think you can stand?” Castiel asks, straightening up and reaching a hand out to Dean.

Before he even thinks about it, Dean grabs the hand and allows himself to be pulled to his feet. His head is still kinda woozy, so he leans into the boy, and is a little surprised when the kid doesn’t step back. Instead, he grips Dean’s shoulder, brows slanted with concern as he stares deeply into
his eyes. “You really should be more cautious when you're approaching strange dogs.”

Dean rolls his eyes, and ow, head still hurts, but he shakes it off and steps back. “Dude, he didn’t seem all that bad when I was walkin’ up to him.”

“That’s how Furditation pulls you in. He gets you to trust him, then he attacks.”

Dean squints at the boy, wondering if he does have a concussion after all. “Wait, what did you call him? Furditation? What the heck kinda name is that?”

The boy sneaks a glance at the dog, and Dean’s gaze follows. The beast is sitting in the same position as it was before it tried to rip Dean a new one, eyes darting between Dean and the boy, a deceptively innocent look upon its face.

Castiel leans towards Dean, voice lowered. “His full name is Furditation’s King of Hell. His owner, Mr. Crowley, calls him Lucifer for short.”

Dean scrunches his face up, confused. “If his name’s Lucifer then why don’t you call him that? Makes more sense than that other name, at least.”

The boy shakes his head, eyes wide and so blue it makes Dean think of when they lived in California one brief glorious summer. They’d gone to the beach almost every day, and the water glimmered like jewels in the sun. “Missouri says it’s bad luck to say the devil’s name too often.”

“Who’s Missouri?” Dean says, intrigued.

Castiel stares at the pavement in thought for a moment before answering. “She…she helps take care of me.”

“So what's your last name? And are you from around here?” Dean can’t help but ask, wondering how they had talked this long without finding out more about the guy. Asking lots of questions is usually one of the first things he does when meeting new people, having learned a long time ago that the best way to break the ice and make friends is to get people talking about themselves.

The boy straightens his back and meets Dean’s gaze. “My full name is Castiel Novak. And yes, I've lived here all my life.”

“Castiel Novak, huh? You mind if I call you Cas instead? Castiel is kinda…long,” Dean smirks. What he’d wanted to say was the kid’s name is weird, but that’s not the kind of thing you say to someone when you first meet, especially if you wanna be friends with them, and Dean does wanna be friends with Cas, he can tell that almost immediately.

Cas shuffles a shoe against the sidewalk, staring down at his foot. “No, if you’ll tell me your name.”

“That’s easy. I’m Dean Winchester.”

A small smile dances along Cas’s face as he reaches out to shake Dean’s hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Dean Winchester.”

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After the introductions are made and Dean decides his head doesn’t hurt too much anymore, they run across the street and jump on the swings in the playground. They alternate between competing to see who can go the highest on the swings (it’s always Cas, mostly because Dean is scared of
going too high, though he’d never admit that), and who can climb the monkey bars the fastest.
Dean decides to test Castiel to see what this kid is made of, daring him to jump from his swing into
the sand in front of them, but his plan backfires when Cas says he'll do it if Dean does, too. Not
wanting to show his fear of heights, Dean shrugs as they push higher and higher on their swings.
“Sure, you jump, I jump, okay?”

Castiel looks over at Dean, their swinging almost synced up. “Did you just quote Titanic?”

Dean can feel his face going red, embarrassed to be called out on watching a chick flick. “Shut up,
the boat scenes are cool. Besides,” he calls out, gulping air as they go higher and higher, “if you
know where the saying comes from, that means you've seen it, too.”

Castiel shoots him a small smile. “I jump, you jump?” he yells, letting go of the chains of his swing
and launching himself into the air.

Dean curses to himself as he watches the boy fly through the air and land on the sand below,
laughing and rolling to a stop. Dean had been hoping he'd chicken out, but since he didn't, Dean
grits his teeth, closes his eyes, and jumps.

Castiel earns a lot of extra points with Dean when he doesn't make fun of him for screaming like a
little girl as he goes sailing through the air.

Before long, Dean’s thirst and renewed headache get the better of him, and he decides it’s time to
go home.

“My house is back that way,” Dean points north along the wide street. “You wanna come with, so
you’ll know where to find me?”

Cas hesitates, contemplating the invitation. Dean’s not sure what the big deal is, and begins to
wonder if it’s because Cas doesn’t want to be friends. He’s about to brush him off and turn away,
not wanting Cas to see how desperate he is to hold onto a new friend, when Cas answers.

“Yeah, but I won’t be able to stay long. My house is back that way.” He points down the street, the
opposite direction where Dean pointed. “I’m supposed to be home before dark.”

“Okay, that’s cool,” Dean replies, relieved. “Hey, you’ll get to meet my weirdo kid brother, and I
can show you this cool slinky I won at Plucky Pennywhistle’s, and maybe you can help me unpack
my room. If you want, I mean.”

“I’d like that,” Cas says, leaning down to pick up his bike by the handlebars.

Dean grins and climbs over his own bike, taking a moment to yell over his shoulder, “Race you to
the stop sign!” before lurching forward and pedaling fast down the sidewalk.

They continue on through the streets, riding side by side, relishing the breeze that picks up as they
pedal faster. Dean tries to show off, sitting back and letting go of the handlebars, and he laughs
with delight when he sees that Cas can do the same thing. He doesn’t even get jealous much when
Cas goes longer without holding on.

When they make it to Dean’s new house, they pull up the driveway, and Cas follows Dean's lead
when he drops his bike into the front yard and runs up the steps, swinging the screen door open.

Dean yells into the house, announcing their arrival. “Mom! I’m back!”

Dean waves a hand to Castiel, signaling him to follow him through the living room into the
“Hi, honey, did you have fun?” Mary calls out, before standing up and turning around. Her eyes widen a bit when she sees Castiel, and her mouth softens into a welcoming smile. “I’m guessing you did, if you came home with a new friend.”

“Mom, this is Castiel. He grabbed me and saved me from Furdition!” Dean stumbles over his words, excited to introduce his mom to Cas. It’s the first time in a long time that he’s wanted to be friends enough with someone to bring them home.

Mary’s eyes squint in confusion. “Saved you from… what?”

“It’s this dog that’s the size of a horse, and I was gonna pet it because I thought it was nice, and then Cas came up behind me and grabbed my arm and pulled me away from it, and I fell down and hit my head, and I could have died, Mom, it’s like some kind of hellhound or something, they call him Lucifer for short.”

Dean takes a deep breath, watching his mom process all the information he just spewed. It occurs to him that maybe he shouldn’t have told her everything because it kinda makes him sound like a dummy, trusting a dog that looks that mean, but before he can try to backtrack and defuse the situation, his mom smiles at Cas.

“So, you saved my son from a hellhound? I guess that makes you his guardian angel, especially with a name like Castiel,” she teases, reaching forward to shake Cas’s hand.

Dean snorts. “You mean an angel like the kind that wears diapers?”

He watches as Cas scowls and blushes. “I don’t wear diapers,” Cas murmurs, letting go of Mary’s hand and turning away.

“Actually, Dean, angels are warriors of God,” Mary corrects him. “They are the most fearless weapons that God has.” She turns to the counter behind her and begins to pull out supplies for sandwiches. “And they most certainly don’t wear diapers,” she adds.

Dean gives Cas a speculative look. “Warriors, huh? That’s kind of badass.”

“Dean! Watch your language!” Mary scolds, but Dean is pleased to notice that Cas seems proud of the description, chest puffing up and mouth curled in a smile.

“Are you boys hungry? I could make us some peanut butter sandwiches, and we have bananas and potato chips and soda. Maybe we could have a picnic,” Mary says over her shoulder as she searches through a box marked ‘cutlery.’ “Dean, your father went to the auto shop to talk to your uncle Bobby about when he’ll be starting work, so he might not be back for a while.”

“Okay, cool,” Dean calls back, leading Cas into the living room. “Bobby’s not really my uncle,” he whispers to Cas. “It’s just my dad’s known him since before I was even born, and he’s like our family and stuff.”

He searches through the boxes in the living room until he finds one labeled ‘Blankets,’ and opens it, pulling out a thick red plaid quilt. He’s about to take it outside to spread across the grass in the backyard, but Mary stops him.

“Dean, there’s a storm brewing, so we’re just going to have to have a picnic inside, instead,” she says, as she brings a bag of chips and bunch of bananas into the room. “How about you go get your brother from the backyard?”
Cas stands awkwardly by the window, staring out at the looming storm clouds, as Dean runs to the back of the house to yell out the door for Sam to come inside. They race each other back into the front living room, Dean letting Sam win, as usual, but when Sam spots Cas on the other side of the room, he stops suddenly. He goes to hide behind Dean, shyness getting the better of him, but Dean just pushes him forward.

“Don’t be a baby, Sam. This is Cas. He’s cool. He can even go higher than me on the swings,” Dean says, urging Sam forward towards his new friend.

Sam looks down at the floor, shuffling his foot along a seam in the hardwood. “Everyone can go higher than you on the swings, Dean,” he mumbles.

Cas chuckles, and Dean watches as Sam looks up at him, face flushed with pride over having made the boy laugh. “It’s nice to meet you, Sam,” Cas says quietly, and he sticks out his hand.

Sam studies it for a few seconds before his face brightens and he reaches out, grasps the hand and shakes it.

Dean rolls his eyes. “You guys are weirdos,” he mocks, and then, “Mom,” he yells into the kitchen, “do you need help carrying stuff? I’m hungry.”

“Yes, honey, just grab this plate for me, please,” she calls out. “It’s getting so dark in here I think we’re going to need some candles to find each other.”

Dean notices Cas turning to stare out the window again as the wind begins to pick up. There’s a rumble of thunder in the distance, with the smell of rain in the air. Dean loves storms, especially when it’s dark and spooky like this, but he wonders if maybe Cas doesn’t, because he’s got a worried look on his face, and it seems like he keeps trying to speak but doesn’t know how.

When Mary walks by to set a lit candle on the fireplace mantle, Cas speaks up. “Mrs. Winchester, I’m sorry, but I think maybe I should go.”


Cas clears his throat. “I just…I’m supposed to be home by dark, and I don’t live very close to here, and with the storm and everything…”

He lets his voice drift off without finishing the sentence, and starts to take a few uncertain steps towards the door.

“There is no way I am going to allow you to leave here on your bike when that storm is about to hit,” Mary replies, voice firm. “Thank goodness for everyone our phone lines are working. What’s your phone number, Castiel?”

“Oh, ma’am, I couldn’t ask you to call home for me, really, it’s no problem for me to—”

Mary lays her hand on Castiel’s shoulder and squeezes. “You didn’t ask me, and I’m not asking you, I’m telling you. Now give me your number.” Her words are tempered by a soft smile, and Castiel has no choice but to answer.

“It won’t be my mom that answers, though, it’ll be Missouri,” he rushes to say after Mary dials the number.

Dean watches this whole scene raptly, munching on a banana and wondering what’s the big deal about Cas staying and his mom calling for permission. He’s not surprised when his mom gets
everything sorted within a matter of minutes, plotting with this Missouri person on the when and how of Castiel getting home.

“We’ll drive you to your house just as soon as Dean’s father gets back with the car, and the storm has passed, sweetie,” Mary says once she’s hung up the phone. She leads Castiel over to the blanket in the middle of the floor, and motions for him to sit down. She looks around at each of the boys and laughs. “I don’t know about all of you, but a picnic in the middle of the house in the dark during a thunderstorm is kinda fun.”

“We should tell ghost stories!” Dean exclaims.

“NO, MOMMY, PLEASE, DON’T LET DEAN TELL SCARY STORIES!” Sam cries out, scurrying across the blanket to crawl under Mary’s arm.

Dean grins as Mary coos at his little brother. “Sammy can be such a wussy baby,” he mutters. “When you spend the night over here sometime, I’ll tell you all the ghost stories I know,” he assures Castiel. The boy smiles bravely at him as he takes a bite of his sandwich, but Dean notices when, at the first loud clap of thunder, Cas scoots a couple of inches closer.

Dean sighs with exasperation, but can’t help hiding a smile. Just his luck to move to a new town, only to become best friends with another scaredy cat like Sam.

Once they’re finished eating, Mary finds a flashlight for Dean so that he and Cas can go up to his room and do some more unpacking. Cas seems quiet and shy again, so Dean figures this is a good time to get him talking about the neighborhood. He needs to get a lay of the land sooner rather than later, after all, and who better to tell him than someone who lives here?

“So, what’s it like around here?” Dean asks, ripping open the flaps on a box marked “GI Joe.”

Castiel steps away from the window and closer to Dean. “What do you mean?”

Dean shrugs. “I dunno. Just, what are the other kids like, where’s the cool places to hang out, who’s got a pool… y’know, important stuff like that.”

Chewing on his bottom lip, Castiel seems deep in thought for several seconds. “I…I don’t really know.”

“Whaddya mean, you don’t really know? Have you never been let out of your house before?” Dean jokes.

Castiel reaches into another box and grabs a couple of model cars. He turns his back on Dean and places them on a nearby bookcase. “No, I get to go out and do things, if I want.”

Dean scrunches his face in confusion. “Then what gives?” He’s starting to wonder if maybe Castiel doesn’t want to tell him. Maybe he’s decided he doesn’t like Dean, or maybe he thinks he’d be embarrassed to introduce him to his other friends. He’s about to tell Cas to never mind, he’ll find his own way around the neighborhood when the boy answers him.

“I don’t really have any friends,” Castiel mutters.

Dean stares at him in disbelief for several seconds. “…How can you not have any friends if you’ve lived here forever? Don’t you talk to people at school, at least?”
He’s completely baffled by this news. Dean has always assumed that if you lived somewhere for longer than just a handful of months, that automatically meant you acquired friends, whether you wanted them or not. Besides, Cas seems cool enough; Dean hasn’t found a reason not to like him yet, even if he is a little weird sometimes.

Embarrassed, Castiel won’t make eye contact as he answers. “I just…it’s not easy for me to talk to people, sometimes. And at school I’m usually too busy to make friends.”

Dean balks at that news. “Is school here that hard? Oh man, if I have to study harder than I had to when we were stationed overseas I will flunk, for sure.”

“Are you in private school?” Castiel asks, a confused look on his face.

Laughing, Dean shakes his head. “No, why would I go to a stuck-up school like that? I only go to public schools.”

“Oh, well then I guess you don’t have to worry. I go to Host Academy,” Castiel replies. “It’s a private school about a half hour away from here.”

Dean wonders if he should feel bad for saying Castiel goes to a stuck-up school, but he finds he’s more disappointed that they won’t be attending school together than anything else. Still he makes an attempt to apologize. “Hey man, sorry I said that about private schools. I didn’t mean you’re stuck up.”

Castiel smiles weakly and sits down on the floor, leaning against the wall. “S’ok, I know you didn’t mean it like that. Besides, I don’t blame you. I hate my school. I wish I could go somewhere else.”

“Maybe you could ask your parents if they’d let you go to public school?” Dean says, sliding down the wall to sit next to Castiel.

The boy shakes his head sadly. “It’s just my dad, and he’d say no. He wants me to be a doctor, like him. And he says going to this school is the best way to prepare me.”

“You don’t wanna be a doctor? That’d be kinda neat, I think.”

Castiel stares down at the floor. “No. I want to be a painter.”

Dean tries to school the look of disbelief on his face. “You mean, like houses?”

Castiel turns his head to stare at Dean, his brow furrowed in confusion. “What?” His eyes go wide as the realization of what Dean meant seems to hit him. “No, not like a house painter! Like an artist. Painting pictures and stuff.”

“Oh! Okay, yeah, that’s pretty cool, I guess.” Dean can’t help the chuckle that escapes his lips when he thinks of his mistake, and when Castiel chuckles in response it begins a chain reaction of laughter that leaves them both clutching their stomachs, curled on the floor, and breathless.

“It’s gonna suck not going to the same school,” Dean rasps, as he tries to regain his breath.

Castiel sits back up against the wall, face suddenly somber. “Maybe you should try to make other friends around the neighborhood instead. People that go to your school.”

Dean scoffs. “Why would I wanna do that? I can make friends with them once school starts.”
“It’s just… most of the kids around here think I’m a freak,” Castiel mumbles, suddenly fascinated with an errant string on the carpet. “And if they know you’re friends with me, they’ll probably think you’re a freak, too.”

Dean stares at the blank wall opposite them. Castiel is right. Dean has moved around enough times to know that if you start out hanging with the wrong person when you move to a new neighborhood, you’ll be seen as a loser and you’ll never be able to shake the label. That didn’t used to bother him so much before; he always knew if people didn’t like him, they’d most likely be moving again soon anyways, so it didn’t really matter. But here, the plan is to stay in Lawrence, to make this a home, and Dean wants to make a go of it, to have it be the kind of life that he’s seen countless other kids take for granted.

But when he glances over at Castiel, he sees someone who he knows could be the best friend he never thought he could have. He’s not sure how he knows it, but deep down, he feels they’re supposed to be important to each other, and in that moment, nothing else seems important at all.

“If people wanna think we’re freaks, let ’em,” Dean says. He watches with satisfaction as Castiel’s head jerks up, eyes wide and disbelieving as he stares back. “I’ve handled assholes like that before, I can do it again.”

“But—”

Dean nudges Castiel’s shoulder with his own. “Cas, just shut up and help me finish unpacking, okay?”

Castiel’s mouth curls up in a soft smile. “Okay, Dean.”

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Chapter 2

Took a drive into the sprawl
To find the places we used to play
It was the loneliest day of my life
You’re talking at me but I’m still far away

~ Arcade Fire, “Sprawl 1 (Flatland)”

Sixteen years old

Dean leans back, propping his palm along the bottom of the steering wheel. He can feel the rumble of the Impala’s engine through the leather of his seat, the vibrations causing a pleasant thrum through his fingers where they grasp the wheel. The road is open before him, and not for the first time he imagines what it would be like to just keep on driving, with no particular destination in mind. Drive somewhere no one knows him, somewhere different and foreign, where everything is wide open and—

“Your hands are nowhere near ten and two, I’m gonna tell mom.”

Dean’s gaze tracks up to the rearview mirror, where it meets with his brother’s accusing hazel eyes. “Just because I’m driving doesn’t mean I can’t still wallop your scrawny ass.”

“Dean, if you wreck my car on the way home from getting your driver’s license I doubt your mother will allow you behind the wheel again before you’re forty,” John says, sighing as he looks over his shoulder at Sam. “And don’t antagonize your brother, Sam, you know he can’t concentrate on more than one task at a time.”

“Hey!” Dean rebuts, offended. “Sitting right here with your lives in my hands.”

From the corner of his eye, he can see his dad trying to hide a smirk. “You’re doing good, Dean-o. For what it’s worth, I had your back in the betting pool. Your mom said it’d take you at least three tries before passing the driver’s exam, but I bet all my money on you getting it your first time.”

Dean turns to stare at his dad, mouth gaping open in shock. “Mom thought it’d take me three times to pass?”

Before he has time to let that sink in, Sam starts giggling in the back seat, and when John glances at the look on Dean’s face he lets loose a bark of laughter. “I’m just teasing you, son,” he says, reaching over to gently ruffle Dean’s hair. “Her money was on you. It’s me and Sammy who thought you’d be a frequent flyer at the DMV. Now watch the road.”

As Sam continues to cackle in the back seat, Dean pouts, hitting his right turn signal a little too forcefully. “You both suck,” he mutters.

Dean reaches forward to turn the volume of the radio up, but John immediately turns it back down again. “How was practice?”
Dean sighs. “It was good.”

“Coach say anything about moving you up in the lineup?”

Doing his damnedest not to roll his eyes right out of their sockets, Dean replies, “No, I didn’t really talk to him today. But I doubt he’ll decide on it until we get closer to tryouts and season starting.”

“I don’t see why he wouldn’t move you up in the batting order. Your RBI is way higher than Walker or Murphy.”

“Yeah, but Dad, Murphy is a senior and Walker is a junior. They’ve got seniority over me. I’m lucky I’m even on the varsity team. Most sophomores stay on JV.”

Dean grips the steering wheel tightly when he hears his dad sigh with exasperation.

“It doesn’t matter how long they’ve been on the team, Dean. You’re better than them, and your stats prove it.” John clears his throat, and Dean’s whole body tenses, preparing for the familiar argument that he knows is brewing beneath the surface. “I don’t understand why you don’t seem to care. You’ve got the talent to go far with this, if you’d just stick to your training.”

Dean can’t bite back his response. “Maybe I just don’t want it as badly as you do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I like playing baseball, Dad. It’s fun. But if I take it as seriously as you want me to, it won’t be fun anymore,” Dean replies.

“Dean, I just want to see you be successful at something, to be happy.”

“Yeah, well, maybe I don’t need trophies to feel happy.”

“Your mom and I are just worried about you. You’ve seemed listless and not yourself lately, and —”

“Can we stop off at the library before we go home? I wanna see if the new Stephen King book is available yet,” Sam pipes up from the backseat, and Dean could kiss his little brother right now for trying to change the subject.

Dean glances up at the rearview mirror and catches his eye. “Sure thing, string bean,” he says with a wink.

John looks out the passenger window and remains silent. Dean wants to reassure him, tell him there’s no need to worry about him, that there’s nothing wrong. But the truth is, he doesn’t even feel like he knows himself anymore, lately.

And he has been listless, feeling as if he wants to run, but not knowing where he wants to run or why. He’s able to ignore it most days, pretend he’s the all-American boy everyone expects him to be, content to play the role that he’d slipped into so effortlessly once he reached high school. But more and more often lately, he can’t help feeling the need to get away from everything. He drifts so easily into melancholy that it even worries himself sometimes. It’d be different if he could put a finger on what’s wrong, could point to something that’s off with himself or with his life and just fix it; but so far all he can figure out is that more often than not, he’s just going through the
motions of each day, doing his best not to scream from the monotony.

He glances out of the corner of his eye at his father next to him, the man’s face stern with lines of worry etched across his forehead. Dean knows at least a couple of the lines are due to his recent attempts to break that monotony by going out drinking and getting high. The fights that had ensued after his parents got wind of his extracurriculars were enough to make Dean think twice about being that stupid and careless again, but his parents still don’t trust him.

Dean bites back the sigh straining at his lips because he knows his dad will notice it. The last thing he wants right now is to reignite the baseball conversation, so he clears his throat, asks Sam about the latest fundraiser he’s working on at school, and lets his brother monopolize them with his earnest words of saving the rain forests or whatever cause he’s obsessing over that week.

John and Dean finish off the list of errands that Mary had given them once they’ve dropped Sam off at the library, their earlier words forgotten. Once they’ve finished and loaded the car with groceries, they pick up Sam and head home. Mary greets them at the door, a wide smile brightening her face as she looks to Dean for confirmation that he passed his driver’s test. When he nods and grins at her, she laughs and wraps an arm around his waist, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“I knew you could do it, sweetie,” she chirps, grabbing a grocery bag from his hand. “I even baked a celebratory pie while you were gone.”

“Aw, thanks mom,” Dean replies, holding the door open for everyone to walk through ahead of him.

“You know, that celebratory pie could just as easily be consolation pie, if you’d flunked it,” Sam snorts. Dean grabs him by the neck and pulls him into a choke hold, eliciting a scream from his brat little brother as he lets the screen door slam shut.

John swings open the door, annoyed look on his face. “Boys, pick up those bags and get in the house. It’s bad enough the neighbors already think we’re a house full of heathens, I won’t give them more evidence to support the theory.”

Dean takes a moment to give Sam a wet willy on the sly, knowing full well that with Dad standing there already yelling at them for being too rowdy that Sam wouldn’t dare yelp and cause more ruckus. Sam whimpers and seethes behind him as they walk through the doorway, and Dean smirks, making note to keep on the lookout for retaliation.

“Dean, I thought we’d have meatloaf for supper, and those baby potatoes you like so much,” Mary calls out to him as he carries his bags into the kitchen. “You should call Castiel, see if he’d like to have supper with us.”

He turns his back on her for a moment, pretending to help put cereal boxes and pasta away in the pantry, so as to hide his unease. “Yeah, sure, Mom.”

She steps up behind him, placing her palm along his back and rubbing soft, soothing circles. “Or maybe you could just drive over to his house and surprise him. It’d be your first official drive on your own,” she says, smiling up at him. It wasn’t so long ago that Dean was the one who had to look up at her, and he’s still surprised sometimes at how much things have changed over the past few years.
She narrows her eyes at him, and Dean notices how the skin at the corners are starting to lose elasticity, wrinkles forming that were not there not so long ago. Dean thinks that, unlike with the wrinkles on his dad, the lines make her look even more beautiful, if that’s possible; but then he’s always been biased when it comes to his mom.

“Did you and Castiel have a fight? I feel like we’ve not seen him in ages,” she says worriedly.

Dean shakes his head. “No,” he replies. “We’ve both just been so busy, it’s hard to keep up with each other.”

And that’s the truth, though Dean can’t help but feel guilty anyways. It’s so easy to get caught up in school and baseball and having a social life, that anything else kinda gets kicked to the shadows and forgotten. And Dean knows he’s not the only one at fault here; Cas has his own extracurricular things at his school, and with as much as he studies, it’s nearly impossible to find time to spend together. They’d both doggedly tried to continue seeing each other as frequently as they were used to when they first started high school, but their schedules became so hectic that they slowly but surely began to drift apart.

When it first started happening, they swore that they’d still hang out together on the weekends, no matter what. But then Cas had to bail out one weekend because of a project he had to work on for chemistry class. And two weekends later, Dean had to cancel because if he didn’t spend all weekend studying for his history exam he’d most likely flunk the semester. Then, Dean started going out with Lisa Braeden, star of the school’s gymnastics team, and for the next several months, he stood Cas up more often than not. Dean wasn’t proud of himself for that, even if Cas never seemed to be pissed at him for it. As much fun as going out with Lisa was (and her bendiness made sure it was fun), he never considered himself as the type of guy who’d choose chicks over his friends.

But even when he’s with Cas, the distance between them sometimes feels as wide as the Grand Canyon. They just can’t seem to connect like they used to, and Dean likens it to both of them listening to the same song but always being one beat behind or two beats ahead of each other. They’re not in sync anymore, and this is not a problem they’ve ever experienced before. Cas never seems to stay long when he comes over, and when he’s with Dean he’s distracted. Always suffering from extremes, Dean has to stop himself from either picking a fight or wanting to cling for dear life. It all confuses and frustrates him so much sometimes that he’d rather not see his friend at all, instead of dealing with the awkwardness of trying to find a way to reconnect.

Dean opens the fridge, sliding the carton of milk into the shelf on the door. He can feel his mom’s eyes boring into his back, so he plasters on a smile before turning around to face her. “I guess I could go over there and see what’s up with him. I’m sure it wouldn’t take much to guilt him into coming back with me for supper.”

Mary pats him on the shoulder. “Wonderful! But let me get that squash casserole recipe for Missouri before you leave. I promised it to her the last time we spoke.”

Dean leans against the counter to wait on the recipe, glancing over at his dad sitting at the kitchen table and flicking through a car magazine. “Hey uh, Dad, you think I could take the Impala?”

John doesn’t raise his head. “Nope. You take your mom’s car or ride your Schwinn, those are your options.”

Dean rolls his eyes, the safety of his dad’s gaze focused on his magazine making him brave enough
to risk it. He hears Sam snort to his right, and looks over at him to find his brother grinning.

“You could always walk too, but your bow-leg deformity probably makes walking long distances hard, I bet.”

“I bet your face deformity makes getting girls to look at you without puking hard, too,” Dean retorts, grabbing his brother and pulling him through the kitchen and into the living room. They wrestle for a few moments before Dean has Sam pushed face down on the carpet with his arms locked behind him. He kneels down on his back, letting his kneecap poke into his side, laughing when Sam cries out and begs him to stop.

“Sammy, you’re supposed to tap out when you want me to stop,” Dean cajoles above him.

Sam grunts, “How can I tap out when you’ve got my arms behind my back, dumbass?”

“I dunno, you’re the one who’s supposed to be so smart around here,” Dean teases, tightening his grip around his brother’s wrists.

Sam groans in frustration and pain before raising his head up and knocking his chin on the floor beneath him. Cackling, Dean lets go of his arms and stands up. “That’s the brainy pipsqueak we all know and love.”

“I hate you,” Sam mutters, as he gets to his feet and pulls at his sleeves to set his mussed clothes right.

Mary walks into the room with a slip of paper in her hand. “Sammy! You know better than to say things like that to your brother,” she tsks.

“But, mom! You didn’t see what he was doing, he could have broken my arm or dislocated my shoulder!”

Mary sighs and hands the recipe to Dean. “Now you’re just being silly, you know your brother would never be stupid enough to leave any marks.”

Dean laughs in surprise, leaning down to kiss his mom on the cheek. “Thanks, mom,” he says.

“You can take my car, but I expect you to fill her up with gas for me before you get back. And promise me you’ll wear your seat belt—”

“Mom, of course I’ll wear my seat belt—”

“And no speeding or doing anything else illegal,” Mary continues, straightening the collar of Dean’s jacket forcefully.

Dean can’t help the chuckle that escapes his mouth. “You think I’d get up to something illegal with Cas along?”

“No, I trust Castiel to keep you out of trouble. I’m talking if you go somewhere without him,” she says softly, brows knitted with worry.

The words not spoken lay heavy between them. After some of the stupid tricks he’s pulled lately, Dean knows it’s going to take a long time for his parents to feel they can trust him again. And if
he’s honest with himself, he really can’t blame them because he’s not even sure why he’s done the things he’s done, or if he may get the urge again.

Dean overheard his parents whispering late one night about how they wished Castiel was around more, that surely Castiel could keep Dean from falling in with the wrong crowds. He used to tease Cas about how much his mom loved him, but he stopped one day when he realized how much Mary’s affection and care meant to his friend. He couldn’t imagine not having a mom there to dote over you every day, Missouri notwithstanding, so he keeps his jokes to a minimum, and makes sure his mom has every opportunity to spoil Cas whenever he’s over.

“Yeah, okay. No bank heists or drug deals. Check.” Dean jokes, trying to lighten the tension. Mary shoots him a half smile, then hands him the car keys and pushes him towards the door.

Sliding in behind the steering wheel, all guilt over his mom’s concern vanishes as he takes a deep breath and grins. It’s his first time driving on his own, and even though he’s in his mom’s Corolla instead of the Impala, he still can’t contain the little sliver of thrill that shoots across his skin. He’s dreamt of this moment for so long that it almost doesn’t seem real. It’s his first taste of adult freedom, and it takes everything in him to remain calm and not push the pedal to the floor and fly right out of town.

As giddy as Dean is, he forces himself to mind the speed limit as he promised, and the drive to Cas’s house seems interminably long as a result. The crappy heater in his mom’s car does nothing to make the drive more pleasant, and the damp, January cold makes holding onto the ice-cold steering wheel painful. He stares out at the bare, gray landscape beyond the wheel, cursing himself for not grabbing his gloves before leaving. The dreariness of the day begins to wear on his good mood, the bare branches of the trees along the street echoing the ache of loneliness he hasn’t been able to shake.

He’s not surprised but is still grateful to see that Dr. Novak’s car isn’t in the driveway or the garage; Cas’s dad always kinda creeps Dean out, making him feel like he’s just biding his time before he forbids Cas to be friends with him any longer. He notices the absence of Cas’s bicycle as he walks by the garage door and peeks through the windows. He’s distressed to realize he feels equal parts disappointment and relief at Castiel’s absence.

Missouri answers the door after Dean rings the bell, and he feels his usual inexplicable guilt when she stares him down, as if she just knows if she lets him through the door, he’ll do something to scuff up her floors or scratch the furniture. Her gaze moves beyond him, staring at his mom’s car behind him.

“Where’s your mother? Don’t tell me she let you out driving around by yourself,” she says, eyes suspicious.

Dean scuffles his feet, staring down at the porch beneath as he mumbles, “No, ma’am. I mean, yes, ma’am, she let me drive by myself. I got my driver’s license today.”

“Boy, I don’t know how many times I have to tell you to look at me when you’re speaking to me before the notion finally finds its way through that thick skull of yours,” Missouri chides. “Anyhow, Castiel is studying late with a friend from school. I don’t expect him home until past suppertime, I suppose.”

Dean wasn’t aware of just how much he was wanting to see Cas until now; he finds it difficult to hide his disappointment long enough to say his goodbyes to Missouri, handing her the slip of paper
with Mary’s recipe before turning away and walking back to the car. It hurts more than he was expecting it to, especially today.

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Dean’s not ready to return home just yet, wanting to take full advantage of his first solo drive, so he cruises by the baseball field at school on the off-chance someone’s braving the chill and getting some practice in at the batting cages. The place is a ghost town, but Dean stops anyways. A few weeks ago, he discovered the hiding place for the coach’s spare key to the equipment room and the pitching machines, so he decides to take advantage of this knowledge, in the hopes of relieving some of the listlessness and moodiness he can feel building in the tension of his muscles.

Despite the cold, twenty minutes of swinging for the back fence has Dean breaking out in a sweat, feeling looser than he has in weeks. He loves the metallic clink of the ball hitting the aluminum bat, vibrations from the violence of the collision making his fingers tingle where he grips the handle. He’s always preferred solitary batting practice rather than with his team because he uses this time to clear his head, eyes lasered in on the pitching machine, nothing else in the world existing in that moment except for him and waiting for that next pitch, adrenaline thrumming through his veins at the anticipation. The clarity and purity of the moment never fails to rejuvenate him and help him focus.

He gets so lost in the pitch and swing rhythm that he doesn’t notice it’s started to snow until flakes begin to weigh down his eyelashes. He blinks owlishly around himself, listening to the crunch of ice hitting the asphalt behind him, sleet mixing in with the flurries of snow. The school parking lot is now completely deserted, what faculty was left after the end of the school day long gone before the approaching storm hits. The sky is impossibly even more gray, a solid sheet of dismal clouds promising some form of winter mayhem, whether it be snow or ice.

Dean sighs, and proceeds to recover all the balls he’d hit into the net, being especially mindful not to leave any clues of having been here. He packs up the pitching machine, moving it and the rest of the equipment he’d used safely back into the equipment room, before locking up behind himself, and returning the key to its hiding place.

He’s still not ready to go home and give up his newfound freedom so soon, but he can’t really think of any place he wants to be. He has school friends he could call on, or he could cruise by the parking lot hangouts of some of his less savory friends, but nothing really appeals to him. Seems like the older he gets, the less patience he has for hanging out with people who expect him to act a certain way or be something he’s not.

Staring up at the darkening sky, he decides he might as well just go home. He knows with the streets getting wet and slippery that his parents are probably freaking out, especially since he’s still not had much experience driving in these conditions. He climbs back into his mom’s car, starting it up and leaning back in the seat with his eyes closed as he waits for the heater to kick in. He thinks about how this isn’t what he’d always pictured for his first day with a driver’s license, but then he’d never really had any specific plans for it. He’d always just thought license = FREEDOM, and his imagination never needed to go further than that for excitement.

He just never pictured freedom as feeling so lonely.

********************************
A belly full of his mom’s cooking and an evening spent kicking Sam’s ass at video games is like a balm to Dean’s moroseness, and he crawls into bed warm and content. School for tomorrow has already been canceled, so he drifts to sleep with the anticipation of a lazy next morning, with not much to do but stare at the snow falling and try to eat more blueberry muffins than Sam.

Just as he’s starting to doze off, hopefully to dreams of Lara Croft climbing out of that pit to come over and make out with him, Dean hears a buzzing sound. *Text message*, and when he peeks an eye open, the glow from his cell phone glares back at him, demanding attention. He sighs and reaches over to grab it off his nightstand.

*Bnkr?* asks the text.

“What the fuck, Cas,” Dean mutters, and
dude it’s colder thn a witch’s tit out thre, he taps back.

*Space heater*

*Blizzard*, he counters.

*I cld steal dad’s car*

*Again, BLIZZARD*, Dean taps.

Almost a minute goes by, and Dean thinks maybe Cas has fallen asleep or gotten distracted. It wouldn’t be the first time a text conversation ended without an end, and usually Dean wouldn’t care, but he can’t help but feel a little bitter about it tonight. He’s about to pull the covers back up around his shoulders when he feels his phone vibrate again in his hand.

*I didnt frgt. I ws going to cme ovr. jst got busy & then my dad was being difficlt & then there ws inconvenient snow*

Dean grins. Cas is the only person he knows that uses words like inconvenient in text messaging, and he finds it equal amounts adorable and exasperating, though he only ever claims the latter publicly.

*Its ok dnt wrry abt it. Mbe we cn hook up ths wknd if no snow*, he answers.

*I’d like that. Talk l8r, gnight*

Dean flops back, lets his eyes drift closed. A minute goes by, and he groans when he hears his phone beep again. He flips it open, and squints at the words.

*Happy birthday D :)*

It gives Dean a warm feeling inside that isn't anything to do with the blankets piled all over him, and he feels a smile tug at his lips despite his tiredness as he zaps back, *thanks cas ;)*.

Shoving the phone under his pillow, Dean chuckles to himself. Even if this was the first birthday spent without his best friend since he moved to Lawrence, at least he was able to end it with him, so to speak. He falls asleep with a grin on his face that has nothing to do with dreams of Lara Croft
or blueberry muffins.
Chapter 3

*And my old friend, we were so different then*
*Before your war against the suburbs began*
*Before it began*

~Arcade Fire, “Suburban War”

**Ten years old**

That first summer after the Winchesters move to Lawrence will forever be one of the happiest times of Dean’s life. It’s the first time he can remember feeling free, and he allows himself to get comfortable and form attachments to his surroundings. Even when he had friends before, he never let himself get too close because he knew they’d most likely be moving on soon.

It’s an adjustment for Dean, to allow himself to open up. A learning period, for both himself and for those around him, which makes it lucky for him that he and Castiel found each other on that first day. Most any other kid he could have met would surely have grown tired of the hot and cold moods of Dean learning how to maneuver the waters of a burgeoning friendship. Those first few weeks, Dean is just as likely to tell Cas to get lost and that he’s tired of hanging out with him, as he is to pull him inside his house and plan their next fifty years together, plotting all the places they’d see and things they’d do.

But Castiel is always patient with him, steadfast and quiet with his loyalty. He never seems to become frustrated with Dean, never asks why Dean is pushing him away. He just jumps on his bike and pedals away down the street, only to return the next day as if nothing has happened, unless Dean breaks down first. More often than not, Dean misses his friend too much to let even a day pass by before they see each other again, and he climbs onto his own bike and make his way to Castiel’s house.

The first time Dean sees Castiel’s home, he almost can’t believe his eyes. The driveway leading from the street is long and winding, and the house is situated on a wide hill just in front of woods. It’s the biggest house he’s ever seen, and he wonders aloud if it’s a castle, but Cas snorts and rolls his eyes.

“If it was a castle, at least then it’d have an excuse to be so creepy,” he says.

Dean tears his eyes away from the house long enough to glance over at Cas. “What, is it like, haunted, or something?” He tries to hide the hopeful note in his tone, because he can tell that his friend’s home is a sore spot, for some reason.

“No, I don’t think so,” Cas replies. “It’s just…empty and too quiet, most of the time.”

Cas had told Dean a little bit about his family already, but now seeing where he lives Dean is even more curious.

“Don’t you ever wanna play or hang out or anything at home?” he prods. “If I lived in a house like
...this, I don’t know if I’d ever want to leave.”

Castiel keeps walking, looking off into the distance at a large cluster of trees behind the house. “No, I just…” He pauses, staring down at his hands holding onto the handlebars of the bike as he walks it along the pavement, “…I just don’t like hanging around here too much.”

Dean stares at the side of Castiel’s face, watching something that looks like sadness etch its way across his features. “Is your dad really that bad?” he says, tentative.

Castiel looks over at Dean, eyes darting away quickly before answering. “He’s just…I don’t think he really likes having kids. Other than to boss us around, maybe. I think he loves his job more than anything else.”

He shrugs and glances at Dean again, offering a weak smile. “At least I have Missouri, though. She cares enough to make up for ten people.”

Dean is about to ask what exactly the deal is with this Missouri person, but before he can open his mouth, the front door of the house opens up and a plump African-American woman storms out onto the steps.

“Castiel Novak, you left this house this morning without one word being said to me of where you were going. Were there ants in your pants? Was there a fire in the Lord’s house only you could put out?”

Dean stops dead in his tracks, eyes wide, and he side-eyes Castiel, noticing as his friend's posture goes impossibly straighter. “Whoa,” he whispers, and he flinches when he watches the woman’s eyes snap from Castiel to him.

“And I suppose this is the infamous Dean Winchester?” she says, walking down the steps. “About time you brought this boy here to meet me, I was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t some imaginary person you made up just to get me to stop nagging you about making friends.”

Castiel clears his throat, and waves in Dean’s direction. “Missouri, this is Dean. Dean, this is my… Missouri,” he finishes, lamely.

Missouri looks down at Castiel, fondness warming her brown eyes. “There’s no shame in calling me your nanny, Castiel. The only shame you should feel is in how dirty those pants are, I told you to be more careful about those grass stains.”

Castiel blushes and looks down at his shoes. “Yes, ma’am, I just forgot again.”

Dean sucks in a breath as the woman’s stare lands on him again. “Boy, didn’t your mama teach you any manners? You look at me when you’re speaking,” Missouri scolds. Chuckling, she adds, “Freckles ain’t nothing to be ashamed of, just proves the sun likes to give you kisses, is all.”

Scowling, Dean stares down at his feet and mutters, “I don’t have that many freckles.”

“Boy, didn’t your mama teach you any manners? You look at me when you’re speaking,” Missouri scolds. Chuckling, she adds, “Freckles ain’t nothing to be ashamed of, just proves the sun likes to give you kisses, is all.”

Dean can feel his face flushing further at the mention of kissing, but before he can melt from the
embarrassment, Missouri reaches over to run her fingers through his sweat-soaked hair, brushing loose bangs off his forehead. Her cool fingers are like a balm, soothing over her teasing words.

“I suppose you boys must be ready to eat your own arms off, if you’ve not had lunch yet,” Missouri says.

And Dean is starving, since they spent most of the morning hiking through the woods behind their favorite playground. It had taken Dean all of a week before he’d ’fessed up to Cas about his favorite hobby of pretending he’s a famous explorer as he traipses through forests and unknown territory. It’s like deep down he knew he’d found a kindred spirit in Castiel, who seems to love exploring almost as much as Dean.

But whereas Dean enjoys pretending he’s a brave pirate or hunter or explorer, Cas much prefers being the person documenting and bringing their discoveries to life on paper. He spends hours upon hours drawing everything they come across, from the canopies of trees and the gnarled fallen logs hindering their path, to the rapid streams and crisp brooks they use to cool themselves off and splash water at each other. Cas draws pirates and cowboys into their landscapes, dressed in outlandish garb and plundering the land with swords, machetes, and guns. He re-imagines the berries, nuts, and honeysuckle that they find and eat along their path each day as exotic foods, some filled with deadly poisons that will bring their heroes to untimely and gruesome ends.

But they’d not found much in the way of berries or nuts this morning, poisonous or not, so to say that Dean is ready for some lunch would be an understatement. But as hungry as he is, he still waits for Cas to speak up for the both of them, feeling as though he’s gotten on Missouri’s bad side already, though he has no idea how.

“Yes, ma’am,” Castiel pipes up finally. Dean looks over at his friend gratefully, but remains quiet, happy to let Cas take the lead here.

“Well, go on into the mudroom and get washed up. I’ll fix you boys some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and maybe some carrot sticks to go with it.”

Dean is about to protest the mere thought of carrot sticks, but before he can open his mouth Castiel has grabbed his arm and is pulling him up the stairs.

“Cas, I can’t eat carrot sticks with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, that’s like… like… blasphemy, or something,” Dean whispers.

“The sooner you realize you will never win an argument with Missouri, the better off we’ll all be,” Castiel whispers back, as he shoves Dean through the front door and pulls him down the hallway to the left. “Just shut up and eat the carrots, Dean. They’re good for you.”

“But at what cost?” Dean mutters under his breath.

Castiel snorts, but doesn’t reply. He shows Dean to the mudroom, where they wash their hands and arms and kick off their shoes. Once clean, Castiel leads the way into the kitchen, a huge open room with stainless steel appliances, white cabinets, and white granite countertops. It’s about what Dean had been expecting, given the cold, sterile way Cas always describes his home life.

“You boys hop over to the kitchen table and have a seat, I’ll have these sandwiches finished in just a minute,” Missouri greets them.
“Yes, ma’am,” Castiel replies, and Dean wonders again if this is how Castiel’s life has always been.

They sit down at the table, in front of a huge picture window looking out into the backyard. Dean glances out the window as Castiel fidgets and folds and refolds a napkin. The yard really is more of just open land than a normal backyard, green lawn sprawling its way to the woods set behind the property. There’s no fence, no swing set, no toys…nothing to prove that there are kids living in the house at all. Dean can feel Castiel’s eyes on him, watching as Dean takes everything in.

“My sister, Anna, and I used to hang out some, before she went to high school,” Castiel mumbles, as if he knows that Dean is wondering about how lonely life here must be. “Mostly just because Missouri made her feel guilty about not ever talking to me.” He shrugs, and looks up, staring out the window. “We’ve never really been close, though. I think because she’s so much older, and she’s a girl, and stuff.”

Dean remains silent, thoughtful, as he glances down at the floor. “Yeah, it’s kinda hard sometimes to hang out with Sammy, since he’s practically a girl, too,” he replies eventually, a feeble attempt at lightening the mood. He raises a foot and settles it on the spindle just below the seat of Castiel’s chair, kicking the wooden leg, feeling the need to remind Cas he’s near.

“Dean Winchester, I know you do not have your foot propped up on that furniture,” Missouri bellows, as she walks over to their table, plates of food in hand.

Dean jumps and pulls his foot off the chair, cowering and staring down at the table in front of him. “No, ma’am, I mean, yes, ma’am, I’m sorry.” He holds his breath for a second, before he adds a meek, “Ma’am.”

Missouri chuckles as she stares down at them. “Now, I know from the few times I’ve talked to your mama on the phone that you were raised right, so I have to assume that you’re just so pig-headed that once you walk out your house you let all the manners you’ve been taught fly out of your ears.”

She strides over to the refrigerator, pulling out a carton of milk and pouring two glasses. “But I’m here to tell you that from now on, you best be treating this house like it’s your second home, and you mind your manners just as if your mama was looking over your shoulder the entire time. You hear me, boy?”

She looks down at Dean with exasperation as she sets his glass in front of him, but Dean thinks he can see fondness there, too.

He nods, murmuring, “Yes, ma’am,” as he stares up at the woman.

She nods, and Dean hears a Hmph, before she turns around and walks out of the kitchen. He watches her back as she leaves, and from the corner of his eye he can see Castiel smirking at him.

“What?” Dean asks, defensively.

Castiel shakes his head, smirk turning into a full-blown smile. “Nothin’. I just don’t think I’ve ever seen you so scared before.”

“Shut up, she’s scary!” Dean exclaims, throwing a carrot stick across the table at his friend, before thinking better of it and leaning over to retrieve it, lest Missouri find out he was throwing food
around. “Is she like that with all your friends?”

Dean watches curiously as Castiel’s cheeks turn pink. “Um, I’ve never really brought anybody over here before,” he mutters.

Dean’s jaw drops in surprise. “Never? Why not?”

Castiel chews on a bite of his sandwich, pushing a carrot stick around on his plate. Dean’s beginning to think he’s not going to answer, which, okay, is kinda weird, but whatever. But then Castiel says, staring down at his plate, “Like I told you, I’ve never really had friends before.”

Dean drops his sandwich, feeling bad for bringing up the sore subject again. “Well, I think all the kids around here must be stupid because you’re awesome, and like one of the most fun and coolest guys I know.”

Castiel’s eyes are wide and blinking as Dean announces his disbelief, and they stare at each other in silence for several seconds. Dean starts to squirm in his seat, feeling uncomfortable about making himself look like a dork writing a fan letter to Cas, but before he can try to make a joke and take the edge off, Castiel replies with a solemn, quiet, “Thank you, Dean.”

They eat in silence for a few minutes, Dean staring out the window as Castiel keeps his focus on his plate. “I wish we could be in the same school,” Castiel mutters.

Dean watches his friend tear apart the crust from his sandwich dejectedly. “Is there no way to get your dad to let you come to my school? Even if you begged him, promised to do extra chores or something?” he asks hopefully.

Castiel shakes his head. “I already asked him and he said no.”

“When did you ask him? Maybe it’s been long enough that he’ll change his mind.”

Castiel’s eyes dart around the room nervously. “Um, a couple weeks ago.”

Dean watches him for several seconds as the realization hits him. Castiel asked to change schools because of Dean. Because he wanted to be with his new friend. His only friend.

He doesn’t know what to say to that, so he keeps his mouth shut, and eventually Castiel picks up his sandwich to finish it off, and Dean follows suit. He even does his best to finish off the carrot sticks, rather than face Missouri’s wrath, but he’s pretty sure he must’ve busted something trying to swallow them down without gagging. “There’s a reason it’s called rabbit food,” he hisses at Castiel when his friend rolls his eyes at his efforts.

Half an hour later, they’ve traipsed through Castiel’s ginormous house and up the stairs to his bedroom, where Cas shows Dean his bad-ass world globe and giant maps pinned to his walls, and Dean thinks he’s died and gone to heaven when he finds the books on New World explorations.

Their earlier conversation has been mostly forgotten, but Dean scoots closer to Castiel where he sits on the floor against his bed, feeling a wave of protectiveness towards him. He promises himself then and there that they will always be best friends.

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That first summer in Lawrence isn’t completely problem-free. For the first time in his short life, Dean becomes the target of a bully. Or two bullies, to be more specific. And Dean isn’t their only, or even first, victim.

They’re fifteen year old brothers with a chip on both their shoulders the size of Wyoming. Dean’s first encounter with them could have gone better; he’s usually smarter than to attract attention to himself in a new place, but he’d felt so comfortable in Lawrence so quickly that he’d become careless.

He’s walking along the sidewalk, on his way from the convenience store down the road, plastic bag of goodies in his hand. Mom had given him money for candy, making him promise to buy a bag of Gummi Bears for Sammy as well. Dean had scoffed at the idea of Gummi Bears being the kid’s favorite candy, embarrassed on his baby brother’s behalf, but he eagerly agreed to risk his own reputation to buy them because, hey, you never turn down free candy.

Just as he’s about to turn the corner back onto his road, he notices two boys across the street, wrestling in the overgrown front yard of a small, weary house. Never one to pass up watching a good fight, Dean sneaks across the street to get a closer look at the happenings. Both boys are at least twice the size of Dean, having obviously hit the growth spurt that’s been eluding Dean so far, much to his own dismay.

Since they’re both about the same size, and most likely have about the same strength, Dean suspects neither one will be able to easily overpower the other, and sure enough, Any time one of them loses his grip, the other curses and loses his footing. Both boys are mussed and red-faced, each getting angrier and angrier by the minute, as neither can seem to figure out a way to win. They’re both playing dirty too, getting in a pinch here, pulling a fistful of hair there.

Dean is just about to lose interest and walk away when the blond one sucker punches the other in the groin, eliciting a groan from the dark-haired boy, who then curls into a ball and mutters obscenities between moans. Before he can stop himself, Dean lets loose a bark of laughter, and the blond kid’s head snaps towards him.

His eyes lasering in on Dean across the picket fence, the boy snarls, “Who the fuck are you?”

Dean instantly stops laughing, his body going tense as he realizes he may have made a huge mistake. “Uh, I’m Dean,” he mumbles, trying his best to play it cool. Normally, he wouldn’t give a crap, he’d play tough and be ready to fight if need be, since he’s not some sissy. But this kid is huge, and Dean just watched him kick some poor schmuck in the nads, so he knows the guy plays dirty.

The boy snorts and steps closer to the fence and Dean. “What the hell kinda name is Dean? And what the fuck were you lookin’ at, Dean?”

Dean takes a step back, and immediately hates himself for it. He’s not one to back down, but he knows he needs to cut his losses here and hope to make up for it later when he’s had a chance to figure out a way to take this guy on, if need be. “I just thought it was kinda funny how you took that guy out, made him cry like a baby, that’s all,” he shrugs.

“You think that’s funny? How funny would it be if I did the same to you, huh?” the kid replies, reaching over the fence to grab hold of Dean’s t-shirt. He bunches the fabric in his fist, and pulls Dean closer to him, staring down at him with beady eyes.
Dean drops his bag of candy and grabs onto the guy’s arm with both hands. The jerk’s skin is hot and sweaty and gross, and Dean does his best to pull himself out of the guy’s grip, but if he pulls himself too much it’ll rip his Zep t-shirt, and goddammit, this is his favorite shirt.

“Dude, what the hell is your problem?!” he protests. “You kicked his butt and made him look like a pansy, why are you messing with me?”

The guy pulls Dean closer, close enough for Dean to see the crazy look in his eyes as he murmurs, “Because nobody talks about my brother like that.”

Oh, shit, Dean thinks. Just my luck I’d piss off some freakazoid family.

He watches from the corner of his eye as the brother on the ground begins coughing, and slowly sits up. “Hey Luke, who the hell is that asshole?” he asks, voice hoarse.

As Luke glances over his shoulder to answer his brother, Dean sees his opportunity and pounces. He grabs the bigger boy’s arm again, with both hands this time, but instead of trying to pull away, he squeezes tightly and twists his hands in opposite directions, using all his strength to give the guy the worst snakebite burn he’s ever given.

Luke screams out and lets go of Dean’s shirt to pull his arm away, which is exactly the reaction Dean wants. Once free, he quickly bends down to scoop up his bag of candy and darts forward, running down the pavement so fast he keeps expecting to see smoke rising from his feet every time he looks back over his shoulder.

Luke chases after him for over a minute, and if it hadn’t been for Dean’s head start he most likely would have caught up to him. As Dean pants his way home, he says a silent thanks to whoever put up that picket fence. Without that barrier, the douchebag, with his longer legs, would have definitely caught up to him and subsequently pounded his ass into the concrete.

When Dean relays the story of the crazy asshole brothers to his friend later that afternoon, Castiel doesn’t seem all that surprised or impressed.

“Oh, that’s the Christianson twins,” Cas says. “Michael and Luke. They kind of rule the neighborhood.”

Dean stops shuffling his deck of cards. “Wait…what? What do you mean, they rule the neighborhood?”

Cas shrugs and takes a bite of a cookie. One of the advantages of having Cas around so much is that Dean’s mom makes sure to have fresh-baked cookies or brownies or pies on hand, since she always gripes about how skinny he is. If it’s just Dean and Sammy, she usually only feeds them fruit and crackers, which is wrong in so many ways that Dean has lost count.

Cas appears to be deep in thought while he chews, and he clears his throat once he swallows. “They’re pretty much the biggest kids around,” he replies finally. “And they like to pick on everyone else, and make the other kids do things for them. And if you don’t do what they say, they’ll beat you up.”

“That’s messed up, Cas,” Dean mutters, staring at his friend in disbelief.
Castiel returns his stare and scoffs. “What else are we supposed to do? They’re bigger and meaner than everyone else. You don’t get far by breaking the rules around here.”

“No, breaking the rules is the only way to get anywhere,” Dean says, smirking. “I say we change things up and make our own rules.”

Leaning forward, Castiel places his arms along the table and narrows his eyes at Dean. “How can we do that?”

Dean shrugs. “I dunno. Keep our eyes open and wait, for now. We’ll figure somethin’ out.” He hands the deck of cards to Castiel, since he’s always better at dealing them anyways, and Castiel nods as he continues to stare at Dean, shuffling the cards as they reach a silent agreement to find a way to put the odds in their favor.

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They get the chance to make their own rules several weeks later, but not before a couple more run-ins with the evil twins, and then a week of staying cooped up in Dean’s room and laying low, much to Dean’s dismay. The only reason he’d agreed to hide out was because Missouri had freaked when Cas came home with a scraped and bloodied knee one evening after Michael had knocked him down on the sidewalk on his way home. Cas had stopped to move a turtle out of the road so it wouldn’t get run over, not realizing that Michael and Luke had put it there for that exact reason, and were hiding behind some shrubs to admire the carnage as it happened.

Dean and Castiel are fine with biding their time until they can get the upper hand, but the stakes become much more urgent one day when they think the coast is clear enough to take Sam to the park. He’d been begging to play on the swings for a while, and Wednesdays are when the Christianson brothers are forced to spend the afternoon in bible study. Dean’s not sure if it’s irony or what that the meanest kids on the block just so happen to have a dad who’s a preacher, but he doesn’t really care as long as he can use their church sentence to his advantage.

Dean, Sam, and Castiel spend a couple hours goofing off on the playground, and when Sam begins to whine about being thirsty, Dean runs across the street to buy them all sodas from the drugstore. He’s only in the store for about five minutes tops, but when he opens the door and steps outside, his whole world grinds to a halt. There across the street in front of the swing set is his tiny little brother staring up into the evil grin of Luke Christianson.

Dean swivels his gaze to Castiel, sitting in the shade of an oak tree with his drawing pad on his knee, miles away as he sketches. Dean bellows his friend’s name, drops the grocery bag full of sodas and chips, and runs across the street without even looking both ways for traffic. All he can think is nononono Sammy no, and he can’t breathe because if those assholes lay one finger on his sweet little brother, he will kill them and everything they love.

He glimpses Castiel running towards Sammy and Luke out of the corner of his eye, and “Hey! Assbut!” Castiel yells at Michael, who’s creeping up behind Sam without the kid even knowing it.

Michael turns towards Castiel, a confused expression on his face, and Dean is grateful to Cas for the distraction because he doesn’t stop running towards Sammy, can only think about getting between him and Luke. Once he reaches them, and before he even realizes what he’s doing, he’s pulling his arm back and swinging a punch so hard at Luke’s face that the boy spins before falling

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to the ground.

“You little—”

Whatever Michael was going to say to Dean is cut off by Castiel launching a rock at his head. It’s enough to knock the kid down and senseless for a few moments, long enough for Dean to grab Sam by the wrist and pull him along towards the street, Castiel following closely behind them.

“Should we try to get away on our bikes?” Castiel pants, shooting furtive glances back over his shoulder at the twins curled up on the dirt behind them.

“There’s no way we’d get away without them catching up, Sammy can’t pedal that fast,” Dean barks urgently. His eyes dart around, looking for anything to give him an idea of what they can do. If there’s one thing he knows, it’s that the Christianson brothers don’t stay down for long, and once they’re up they’ll be coming for blood.

Sammy tugs on Dean’s shirt. “Dean, I’m scared. I wanna go home.”

Dean reaches down and picks up his little brother, straddling him on his hip. “I know, buddy. I’m gonna get us out of this.”

Movement across the street grabs his attention, as a patron leaves Crowley’s coffee shop. Dean avoids that place like the plague, as Mr. Crowley gives him the heebs and the jeebs, but right now it looks like it might be the sanctuary they need.

When he hears a shout from one of the twins, Dean reaches over and grabs Castiel’s arm with his free hand, pulling him towards the street. “Come on, I got an idea.”

“Dean, what…we can’t go into Crowley’s, he hates kids!” Castiel pulls his arm back, trying to resist, but Dean’s a persistent shit when he needs to be, and right now they all need it.

“He’s our only option at the moment because the jerks at the drugstore will kick us out as soon as they realize we’re not buying anything, and the bookstore is closed. Now shut up, and move!”

They dodge across the street, and it’s not a moment too soon, as the twins start yelling after them. Castiel darts ahead of Dean and Sam, grabbing the door handle of the coffee shop and flinging the door open wide to let them in ahead of himself. The bells above the door jingle with their arrival, and Dean blinks rapidly to let his eyes adjust to the change in light. The inside of the shop is dark, compared to the brightness of the summer afternoon outside, and scents of coffee, chocolate, and spices envelop them immediately.

“Hello boys,” sounds a dark, whiskey-drenched voice behind the counter. “Looks like you’ve got yourselves into a bit of a pickle.”

Sam wiggles against Dean’s side, so he lets his little brother slide slowly down. Once he’s reached the floor, Sam grabs onto Dean’s hand, and moves to hide behind him. Castiel steps closer to Dean, in solidarity as a team against this next threat, as well as to help Dean protect Sam.

“Um, yes, sir,” Dean mumbles. He looks around the rest of the dining area, and doesn’t know if it’s in their favor or not that there are no other customers in the shop. “Uh, would you mind if we, uh, hang out here until those two ass—I mean, kids, leave? We, uh…we don’t have any money to buy anything, but—”
“If you don’t stop that inane chattering, I’ll throw you to those piss-ant wolves just to keep from getting a headache,” Crowley rumbles.

It takes everything in Dean not to reply with a smart-ass retort, but little Sammy’s hand squeezing his fingers reminds him of why they’re here. “Sorry, sir,” he mutters.

“As it is, the only things I loathe more than snot-nosed brats are the Christianson snot-nosed brats, so if you’ll sit down and shut up, I’m of a mind to be generous with you lot today.”

“Thank you, sir,” Castiel says. He nudges an elbow at Dean, signaling for them to move over to a corner out of the way.

“You’re Novak’s kid, right?” Crowley inquires.

Castiel nods dumbly.

“Your father is a condescending jackass who can’t tip for shit,” Crowley sneers.

Dean can practically see the hackles rising on Castiel as his shoulders tense and his back goes even straighter than usual, but Dean pinches his side to get his attention. “Dude, the guy is saving our asses, don’t mess it up,” Dean mutters under his breath.

Castiel turns his head to give Dean a cold look, his eyes narrowed, but he doesn’t reply to Crowley.

“I would imagine the illustrious Dr. Novak doesn’t take too kindly to his golden boy sullying himself with the likes of the Winchesters,” Crowley continues.

The man’s words confuse Dean, and when he glances at Castiel’s flushed face, he can feel his stomach twist into knots. It’d never occurred to him that Castiel’s dad might not approve of their friendship, but Crowley’s insults and Cas’s face tell a different story.

“You don’t know me or my family,” Castiel seethes. “So you shouldn’t talk about things you know nothing about.”

“How do you even know about my family?” Dean can’t help but ask. “We only moved here a few weeks ago.”

Crowley grins at them, his face predatory and calculating. “Oh, I know about every little creepy-crawly that lives in this hole of a town. The things I know would make your beady eyes pop out of their cute little sockets.”

They watch as Crowley stares through the window, his focus narrowed at something he sees. When they turn to see what he’s looking at, they find the Christianson brothers standing just outside the window. The twins are close enough so that they can see inside, despite the glare of the afternoon sunlight, and they’re both scowling as their glances dart between Dean, Sam, and Castiel standing in their corner, and Crowley.

Crowley chuckles. “Those two Mensa candidates are a blight on this neighborhood. They heckle and harass my customers, scaring away my business. They bullied my tailor. And yesterday I caught them throwing stones at my dog.” He slides a hand into his pocket, strolling towards the front of the shop. Casually, he opens the door, sticking his head out to say, “If you two mongrels
don’t disappear within the next thirty seconds, I will be calling the police first, and your preacher daddy second.”

Dean and Castiel both suck in a breath, watching as the twins scowl and mutter what are most likely obscenities, before slowly turning and ambling off down the street. It’s one thing for Crowley to give them safe haven for a few moments, but threatening the twins and forcing them to leave is above and beyond what they’d ever expect from him. Dean wonders if maybe he’s been wrong to think this man is a scary jerkface.

The bells above the door jingle as Crowley pushes it closed. “That should get rid of them for a little while, though I wouldn’t bet on you making it home without a run-in.”

Dean gulps. He has no clue how they’re going to get home safely. There’s no way those assholes won’t be lying in wait for them. He knows he should probably call his mom, but dragging his parents into this is a last resort, because they’ll make a big deal about calling the twins’ parents, and it’ll all get humiliating, and then the twins will just come after them even harder.

He looks up to find Crowley watching him, and he can’t help the chill that runs down his spine. He definitely wasn’t wrong in thinking this dude is creepy as all hell.

“If you’re overworking that thick noggin of yours to find a way to get home safely, there isn’t one,” Crowley says. “Unless…”

Crowley lets his words drift off into the air, staring up at the ceiling as if he’s deep in thought. For some reason though, Dean can tell he’s not thinking hard, he’s just waiting for encouragement to continue, and after several beats Dean loses his patience, sighing as he says, “Unless what?”

The man looks down at them, meeting Dean’s gaze with a smirk. “Welllll, I suppose I could be convinced to give you boys a ride home….if you’re willing to help me, of course.”

Dean squints at him, trying to figure out what the man’s angle is. He knows better than to take a ride with a stranger, even if that stranger is supposedly an upstanding citizen and business owner. But, it’s not a long ride, and between him and Castiel, he’s sure that if the dude tries to pull something, they could take him. Besides, it’s not like they couldn’t find him if he did try to pull something, and he’d lose his business and his place in the community if he messed with kids.

“What do you want?” Castiel asks, chin jutting forward in defiance.

Crowley walks towards them, and leans against the wall with a casual arrogance that speaks of a man used to twisting people around his finger to get what he wants. “What would you say if I told you there was a way to get Dumb and Dumber out of our collective coiffures for a long, long time?”

Dean and Castiel exchange wary looks. “I’d say cool. But how?” Dean asks, not even bothering to hide the suspicion in his voice.

Crowley smirks again, and there’s just something about the man’s smile that makes Dean want to wipe it off his face with a hearty slap, but he holds back. “Let’s just say that in my dealings about town, I’ve acquired a number of friends in low places,” Crowley continues, “and while in those low places, said friends have gotten glimpses of shady extracurricular activities performed by upstanding, and not-so-upstanding, citizens of this great metropolis.”
Crowley pauses to look down at them, raising an eyebrow as he stares and waits.

“And?” Dean urges. He doesn’t think he’s ever met a man who likes the sound of his own voice as much as this guy.

Rolling his eyes, Crowley huffs impatiently. “No one could ever mistake you for the Hardy Boys, could they?”

Dean knows he should be insulted by that, but he has no idea why or who these Hardy Boys are. He spares a glance at Castiel, whose eyebrows are knitted together in confusion as well, and opens his mouth to protest but Crowley cuts him off.

“Never mind, I’ll spell it out for you, dimwits. I know of a back lot where those Christianson brothers sometimes frequent to partake in some illegal herbal fun, as well as drinking enough alcohol to down a small horse.”

“You mean like a pony?” Sam pipes up from behind Dean, and Dean wants to slap his hand across his little brother’s mouth to keep him quiet, but the damage is done.

Crowley looks down at Sam peeking from behind Dean’s shirt. “Well, lookit there, moose does have a voice.” The man gives Sam a once-over. “Or maybe I should call you Mooseling.”

“My name’s not Moose, it’s Sam.”

“With hair like that, you’re lucky Moose is all I called you,” Crowley retorts. “And yes, like a pony.” He pauses to glance between Dean and Castiel before continuing. “So, boys, what do you say?”

Dean is still as confused as he was before Crowley explained himself, and he’s frustrated and tired, and the adrenaline rush from fighting the twins is leaving him feeling shaky and irritable. “What do we say about what? You still haven’t told us what you want from us.”

Crowley stares up at the ceiling and sighs. “I want the two of you to play like the Little Rascals and sneak a peek at the twins sullying those halos their precious daddy believes they wear, videotape it, and use it to get those boys off my street forever.”

“But…why us? Why can’t you do it?” Castiel asks the first question Dean thought.

“Because I can’t be arsed to do it myself. Because that takes more effort than I’m willing to put into keeping my customers bully-free. But you boys…” Crowley pauses to smirk down at them. “You have even more to gain from this than I do. I’d say this is a case of I’ll scratch your back, you scratch…your back.”

Dean chews on his lip for a moment. “Say we do this, we get video of them doing…whatever. Then what? What are we supposed to do with it?”

Crowley rolls his eyes again, returning to his spot behind the counter. “That’s for you to figure out. You could send it straight to the good reverend, but I tend to favor never-ending blackmail over swift and just punishment. Blackmail is the gift that keeps on giving, after all.”

“We’ll do it,” Castiel speaks up suddenly.
Dean whips his head around to stare at his friend. “Cas, what? We should talk this out first.”

“Well, well, well,” Crowley drawls. “I can’t say I’m not surprised that you’re the first to volunteer, Master Novak. You’ve let the Christiansons knock you around for years. Have you always wanted to lower yourself to our level, or did the great and powerful Oz pay you a visit and give you a dose of courage?”

Dean watches Castiel shrug as a blush blooms across his cheeks. “I don’t care if they push me around. But I don’t want Dean and Sam to have to put up with it, too.”

Dean can feel a warmth rising in his chest, and he wants to reach over and squeeze his friend’s arm or hug him or something, but before he can, Crowley interrupts. “Ah, friendship is a many splendored thing, or something like that.” He clears his throat, and unties his apron, throwing it across the counter. “Well, enough dallying, if I’m going to play the chaperone in this little fairytale, then we need to get on with it before the afternoon rush, as I’d rather not be seen being the Fred to your Scooby gang.”

“Will you be giving us the details on how to get video of the twins?” Castiel asks.

Crowley nods, waving his hands to rush them out of the shop. “Yes, yes, no worries, I’ll give you all the details you’ll need. Now run along and grab your things from the park before I change my mind and throw you to those hyenas.”

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Once Crowley has them safely deposited at the Winchester home, and they’re in the privacy of Dean’s bedroom, Dean turns on Castiel. “What the hell, dude? Why did you make the deal with that creep?”

Castiel sighs, climbing onto the futon in front of Dean’s window. “I didn’t really see any other choice, Dean. We needed to get out of there and get Sam home safely, and there’s no way we could have made it on our bikes without the Christiansons catching up with us.”

“Yeah, but we should’ve talked it out first. I don’t like making deals with Crowley,” Dean replies, shaking his head. “This sucks.”

“What would you have me do? Keep my mouth shut, let us take the high road, and get beat up in the process? Let Sam get hurt? Does that sound better to you?”

Dean grunts in frustration. “Dude, no! I just…” He wipes a sweaty hand across his face. “Never mind. Forget it. So how are we gonna do this?”

Castiel stares down at his hands for a few moments. “I think it should just be me to go.”

“Okay, now I know you’ve lost it, because there’s no way that’s gonna happen,” Dean replies.

“If you get caught in that part of town, your parents will freak out. I know how strict your dad can be, Dean,” Castiel implores.

Dean scoffs. “Oh, like your dad is any better? He’ll put you on lockdown until the next Ice Age, and make you read medical school books even though you can’t even pronounce half the words.”
“I can pronounce *all* the words, Dean, you know I’m good at languages,” Castiel scowls. He clears his throat before continuing quietly. “Besides, my father is distracted with other things right now. I doubt he’d care if I got caught there.”

Dean watches his friend scratch at a mosquito bite on his knee, the spot red and inflamed. “Why, what’s going on?”

Castiel’s shoulder lifts with a weak shrug. “My sister ran away.” He wipes his nose with the back of his hand, glancing up quickly at Dean before looking away again. “She’s been gone for a week.”

“What?! Why didn't you tell me before? What happened?” Dean exclaims.

Castiel meets Dean's eyes, his face grim. “My dad didn't want everyone knowing, so he asked me and Missouri not to tell anybody yet.” His mouth twists. “Anna was tired of my dad saying she has to go to the college he wants her to go to, and grounding her for staying out too late, so she ran away.”

Dean watches Castiel, wondering what it must feel like to now be the only kid in that creepy house. “But shouldn't he be telling the cops and getting everybody to help find her? Why wouldn't he let you tell anybody?”

“Missouri said he's ashamed that one of his kids would want to run away, so he's trying to pretend everything is okay. He's been calling around and trying to find her, but he won't be able to.”

“How do you know that?” Dean asks, eyes narrowing.

A sad smile makes its way across Castiel’s face. “Because Anna is very good at disappearing, she always has been. And she left me a letter saying goodbye and not to worry about her, that she has friends somewhere far away who are going to take her in.”

“Cas, that’s messed up. She’s only sixteen, she can’t make it on her own!”

“Oh, you don’t know Anna,” Castiel replies ruefully. “She can make it just fine, and she will. She always finds a way.” He meets Dean’s shocked gaze. “So, that’s why I know my dad won’t care if I get caught. He’s too busy with other stuff right now.”

Dean stands up from his perch on the edge of his bed, and walks over to sit down next to Castiel on the futon. “I’m sorry, Cas. I know it must suck to not have Anna around anymore.”

“She wasn’t around much even before she ran away, so not much has changed, I guess,” Castiel mutters.

“Still though, I’m not gonna let you go to that part of town and videotape this by yourself,” Dean replies. Before Castiel can protest again, he adds, “Dude, I know you’re smart, but to do this you’re gonna need to have street smarts, too, and no offense, but that’s one thing you’re pretty dumb about.”

Castiel frowns but stays quiet, so Dean continues. “As much as I’ve moved around all my life, I had to learn a thing or two about being sneaky in some shady places. So between the two of us, I think we could actually do this.”
“Dean, I—”

“Cas, a team is better than doing things alone, right?” Dean interrupts.

Castiel’s brows knit together. “I don’t know, I’ve never been part of a team.”

Dean tries hard not to roll his eyes. “Trust me, it’s better. And you and me, we’re a team. That means I don’t let you do anything crazy without me, and you don’t let me do anything crazy without you, either. Remember the swings? You jump, I jump, okay?”

Castiel smiles uncertainly, and Dean can see he’s trying not to sound too hopeful and dorky when he says, “Okay.”

Dean pulls his legs up to sit cross-legged, turning to face Castiel head-on. “So, first things first, where do we get a video camera?”

Castiel smiles more easily. “My dad has one he never uses, so he won’t even know it’s missing.”

They get down to business after that, and it’s not long before they’ve devised a plan involving minimal risk that could yield maximum results. The backlot is a fifteen-minute bike ride from Dean’s house, and since the twins usually hang out there late mornings, according to Crowley, Dean and Castiel make plans to get there early the next morning to scope the place out first.

The following day, Dean wakes nervous and excited. If this works out, they and the rest of the neighborhood won’t have to worry about those bullies for a long time. Plus, Dean always loves getting the upper hand over jerks, so he can’t wait to meet Castiel after breakfast. Once he and Cas get on their bikes, the ride to the backlot seems to take forever, but after they arrive they quickly find some shrubs that will be adequate cover for them, as well as providing an awesome angle for recording the twins doing their thing.

They hide their bikes as best they can behind the bushes, and crawl between the branches to get comfortable as they lie in wait. “You nervous?” Dean asks Castiel, as he watches his friend fidget and squirm.

“A little. You?”

Dean shakes his head and grins. “Nah. I’m just excited. As much as I hate helping Crowley, I gotta say it’s going to be cool to shut those jerks up, once and for all.”

Castiel opens his mouth to reply, but shuts it quickly when they hear the sound of voices. He turns the camera on to record, and a few seconds later, the twins shuffle into view. Dean and Castiel remain as quiet and still as they can while they watch and record the brothers cackling and pushing each other. When Luke pulls a beer can from the large bag in his arms, Dean whispers, “Bingo,” as Castiel zooms in on the can and Luke as he pops it open and takes a swig.

Dean and Castiel end up stuck in that thicket for nearly two hours as the twins make their way through a six-pack of beer and share a joint between them. Dean almost gives them away when a bee begins buzzing around his head, but Castiel slaps a hand across his mouth to keep him quiet, and presses up against him to make him stay still. Dean wants to scream like a little girl because he hates bees, but Castiel has always had a fondness for them, so he doesn’t let Dean try to squash it. He urges Dean to just be still, and then uses his freaky bee-whisperer skills to encourage it to find someone else to bug, so to speak.
Once they get back to Castiel’s house, they hook the camera up to his dad’s computer and take a look at the footage they got. Dean could kiss Castiel’s dad right now, because that fancy camera got everything, in crystal-clear quality. There’s no way anyone could question who is in the video.

Castiel snoops around through his dad’s desk until he finds some blank dvds, then they make quick work of burning the footage to three discs – one for the twins, one for Castiel, and one for Dean, for safe measure.

“How’d you know how to do all this computer stuff?” Dean thinks to ask, watching as Castiel slides the discs into their paper covers.

Castiel grins. “Being a loner has its perks, I guess.”

The package gets dropped off at the post office the following day, and by the weekend, it’s obvious to Dean and Castiel that they’ve won the war. As they’re hanging out in the park, Luke and Michael walk by, but instead of stopping to tease and terrorize the kids on the swings, a look of fear flits across both their faces, and they rush to cross the street and get away.

From then on, it’s like a completely different neighborhood, one in which none of the kids have to look over their shoulders for fear of being attacked by a Christianson. Occasionally, one of the other kids at the park will wonder aloud why the twins had such a sudden change of heart, and Dean and Castiel will look at each other and smile, but they won’t say a word.

It still irks Dean that all of this served to help Crowley out, but thankfully, they’re able to avoid dealing with the weird guy anymore. One day not long after the dvd was mailed, they walk past the man in front of his shop as he’s changing the Closed sign to Open, and when he sees them, he nods once at Castiel and smirks. Dean turns to look at Castiel, and finds his friend returning the nod with narrowed eyes. It annoys the crap out of Dean. He still can’t get over that Cas had actually taken Crowley’s side. Dean had wanted to send the dvd straight to the twins’ parents; as much crap as those jerks had put everyone through, he thought they deserved all the punishment they could get. But Castiel held fast in his agreement with Crowley. The constant threat of punishment hanging over their heads is way worse than the punishment itself. The imagination is scarier than any reality could be, Castiel had said, with a gleam in his eye.

“Remind me to never get on your bad side,” Dean quipped.

“You couldn’t even if you tried,” Castiel had answered.

And even if Dean pretends to hate it when Castiel says stuff like this, he still files it away in his brain inside the overflowing folder titled Reasons Cas Is Awesome.

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The rest of their summer goes by in a happy blur that begins with a pile of lumber and a brilliant idea. Dean never in a million years would have thought that something as simple as a treehouse could make him happy, but when his dad first mentions building them one in the giant oak tree in their backyard, he almost pulls a muscle from his giddiness.
And this isn’t some cheesy thing, where a few planks are just nailed to it with a rope or flimsy ladder leading up. John decides he’s going to go all out for his boys (and, incidentally, for Castiel), and build them a “fort in that damn tree.” What they end up with isn’t quite the fort he’d promised, but Dean could not care less about what it lacks because what it has is awesome.

John enlists both Dean and Castiel to help build it, even going so far as to include them in designing the “blueprints” for it. The boys get so excited looking through magazines for treehouses that John had bought to get ideas for it; there’s so many features that they never would have considered, and they have a difficult time narrowing down their favorites to just a few. One thing both Dean and Castiel know that their treehouse must have is a hidden compartment. In the magazine, it’s used as a time capsule, but they can’t decide exactly what they want to put in it yet. They do agree not to tell anyone else about it, so it’s a place for just the two of them to hide any kind of small stuff they want.

The night before they start building the house, John takes Dean along to Home Depot to collect the supplies, and Dean discovers that one of his most favorite places in the world happens to be a home supply store. The smell of freshly cut lumber, gasoline, supplies, paint, and other chemicals, gives him chills in the very best way. He finds himself wishing they could spend the whole week there, exploring the wonders of each aisle, and about the only thing that keeps him from pulling a Sammy tantrum to stay longer is his dad insisting they need to get home to finish the plans.

They wake as the birds begin to sing the following morning, Castiel having slept over the night before so they can start building as early as John deems it proper for a Saturday morning. The boys aren’t allowed to help as John gets the flooring laid out and the foundation of the house secured on the branches. Dean stands by, watching as patiently as he can stand it, while Castiel sits cross-legged under the awning of the patio, quietly sketching the proceedings in his notebook. Once the first boards are steady and secure on the branches, John at least allows Dean to hand him tools so that he doesn’t have to climb down off the ladder every time he needs something not on his toolbelt, but it’s not enough to keep Dean from petulantly asking every once in a while when he can climb up and start really helping.

About the time John starts threatening to tear down all the progress he’s made and forget all about a treehouse if Dean doesn’t stop asking, “When can I help, why can’t I just climb up and see, Dad, come on,” Mary opens the back door and hollers for them to come inside for sandwiches and lemonade. Dean rolls his eyes as he watches Castiel jump from his perch on the step and run inside, but he can’t really blame his friend; the heat and humidity from the height of the early summer’s day is taking its toll on all three of them — their shirts are sticking to their backs and sweat is trickling down their foreheads and necks.

Once lunch is over, Dean hears the words he’s been longing for all morning. “I suppose it’s time to start building the walls, now, so you and Castiel can climb up and help,” John says, wiping the back of his neck with a cool, wet cloth.

Dean jumps from the table, chair scraping loudly against the floor, and runs for the back door, Castiel close at his heels. He stops when he hears his mom’s voice calling after him.

“Dean, Castiel, promise me you will both be careful! If I hear that you’re not, you will not be allowed to help and won’t get to see it until it’s done, if even then, do you understand me?” Mary orders, voice stern.

“Yes, ma’am,” they both chime in unison, meeting Mary’s serious gaze and doing their best to to show that they know she means business.
“I want to help, too!” Sam whines from his seat, feet kicking noisily at the legs of the table.

Mary steps over to him, fingers brushing the hair off his forehead, eyes warm as she stares down at him. “No, my little man, not today. Maybe we can find something to build here inside.”

Dean looks back guiltily at his little brother. He hasn’t been hanging with Sam as much as he used to since they moved to Lawrence. He’s just been having so much fun exploring the neighborhood and having a best friend that he doesn’t have to worry about leaving in a few months or a year. He makes a mental note to hang out with Sammy more later; kid brother or not, he actually likes being around the pipsqueak. He throws Sam a wink before running out the back door, racing Castiel to the tree.

Once settled securely on the floor of the treehouse, both Dean and Castiel stare out between the branches, eyes wide in wonder. Dean knew it’d be cool to have a treehouse, but he’d had no idea just how cool until now. It’s higher up than it seemed standing on the ground, but the floor is so big and secure among the huge limbs that Dean doesn’t feel scared. This is something hidden and private, something his dad built especially for them with his own hands, and he knows Dad would never allow anything to hurt them. Dean looks over at Castiel and smiles when he finds the other boy staring back at him.

“This is gonna be so awesome,” Dean grins.

“I bet it’ll be even cooler once the walls are up,” Castiel smiles back, jumping when he hears John call up to them from below.

“Boys, I’m gonna hand up some planks and tools to you, be careful setting them aside,” John yells.

Dean kneels over the side of the floorboard to look at his father. “Okay, Dad! This is so cool!” he can’t help but squeak out, smiling when he sees his dad laughing at him. It’s been too long since he’s seen his dad laugh like that, shoulders loose and easy.

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It takes the rest of that weekend, the following weekend, and most of the third to finish the treehouse. It’d been difficult for Dean to restrain himself from begging his dad to work on it each evening during the weeks after John stumbled home from work, but he knew better than to ask, especially when Mary would give him those serious looks every time Dean dared to bounce around his dad with hope in his eyes. His dad worked hard at the garage every day, and the last thing he needed or wanted was to climb into a tree, hammering and nailing and placing windows until way past his bedtime.

Dean realizes just how worth the wait is once he and Castiel are snugly ensconced among the branches late Sunday evening. It’s the fourth of July, and their bellies are full from a feast of fried chicken, hot dogs, corn on the cob, potato salad, watermelon, and homemade ice cream, all prepared by Mary and Missouri, who the Winchesters had invited over once they discovered she’d not been able to visit her family for the holiday this year. The day had turned into an impromptu party after John phoned his boss, Bobby, that morning, asking for the dimensions on a surprise that Bobby was selling to him for the treehouse. John had suggested Bobby bring it over that evening for the cookout, and the gruff older man showed up with a widow and her young daughter.
Ellen and Jo Harvelle both have Bobby Singer wrapped around their little fingers, as Dean curiously notes the way his “uncle” acts around them. The man always seems to complain and grunt no matter what’s going on, but with Ellen he’s polite and respectful, and Dean’s not sure but he could swear it looks like the man actually ironed his shirt and jeans, not to mention brushed the hair under his cap. And Dean catches him more than once watching the little blonde girl prancing around with what looks to be fondness in his eyes.

After an hour of noticing Bobby’s odd behavior, Dean asks his mother what’s wrong with the man.

Mary shushes him, then pulls him away into the hallway towards the bathroom, secluded from the others. “Now don’t you go teasing anyone about this, but I think Uncle Bobby has a crush on Ms. Ellen,” she confides.

“Ewww, a crush?” Dean gapes. “I thought old people didn’t get crushes.”

Mary hides her mouth behind her hand, and her eyes light up as if she’s trying not to smile. “People of all ages can get crushes. But I don’t want you saying anything to anybody about this, do you understand?”

“Oh, okay, fine,” Dean sighs. “Can I still tease Jo about other stuff?”

Mary laughs. “You can, but I wouldn’t recommend teasing her too much. I heard Uncle Bobby taught her all his fighting moves.”

When they step back outside, Dean’s gaze wanders the yard until he finds Castiel. His friend is sitting cross-legged in the grass, Sam and Jo both perched on a blanket in front of him. As Dean gets closer to them, he notices that Castiel has his notebook on his knee, and he’s so busy drawing something he’s not aware that Dean has squatted beside him until Dean thumps him on the head.

“What’s drawing?” Dean asks, stretching his neck so that he can peek over Castiel’s arm.

“He’s drawing us!” Jo exclaims. “He’s making Sam a cowboy and me a cowgirl, and we’re both gonna be riding horses and I’m gonna have a lasso!”

“That’s pretty cool,” Dean says.

“Hey, Cas,” Jo pipes up. “Why don’t you draw Dean riding a dinosaur or something? I bet you can draw neat dinosaurs.”

Castiel keeps drawing for a few seconds before mumbling, “I don’t really draw Dean much.”

Dean had been wondering why he’d never seen himself in any of Castiel’s drawings, but he’d felt too self-conscious to ask. He can’t help but feel a little hurt by Castiel’s words, but he does his best to cover it up. “Yeah, I’m too pretty to draw, and not even the best artists in the world can do me justice,” he jokes.

Jo giggles. “That’s silly, boys can’t be pretty! Only girls can be pretty. Boys are handsome.”

“No way, I’m pretty and handsome. Boys can be pretty and girls can be handsome, and everybody can be everything in between. And I’m one of the lucky ones who gets to be both.” Dean raises his chin, looking down his nose at all of them, and trying not to laugh when Sam and Jo start
giggling.

Castiel remains quiet through all of this, concentrating on what he’s drawing. Dean takes a peek over his shoulder again to see his progress. “So, why horses? Why not dinosaurs or giant lizards or something?”

Castiel glances up at Dean, one eyebrow raised. “I wanted to draw them riding unicorns, but Joanna Beth didn’t approve of that.”

“I’m not some girly girl who loves unicorns and rainbows and kittens. I’m as tough as any of you, I could beat all three of you up with one hand tied behind my back,” Jo declares.

Dean rolls his eyes and stands up. “I’m sure you could, blondie.”

Sam speaks up before Jo can complain. “Hey, Castiel, could ya draw me riding a unicorn? I like unicorns.”

“Oh course you do, Samantha,” Dean teases, reaching down to muss his little brother’s hair.

Jo falls onto her back giggling, as Sammy bats the offending hand away, pouting.

“You know, Sam, I read a book that said unicorns were tough and mean and killed things with their horn,” Castiel states, eyes planted firmly on his notebook as he continues to draw. “So, I don’t think they’re really all that girly, even if they do fart rainbows.”

Dean joins in the laughter with Sammy and Jo once he hears about rainbow farts, and kicks his foot affectionately at Castiel’s back. Castiel looks up quickly, as if he’s startled by all the laughter, and Dean smiles down at him before turning to walk away. “You’re pretty funny, Cas,” he says over his shoulder, and he doesn’t fail to miss the pleased look that crosses Castiel’s face.

It isn’t easy for Dean and Castiel to hang around with everyone at the party instead of climbing up into the treehouse, especially after having waited what feels like forever for it to be built. But both John and Mary were adamant that they not be rude to their guests, stating that the treehouse will be there for the rest of their lives, but these guests are only here for the afternoon and evening. Dean’s insistence that of course we’re gonna see everybody again, it’s not like it’s our last night on Earth fell on mostly deaf ears.

But after stuffing themselves with delicious home-cooked food and being polite and social with the party-goers and escorting Sam and Jo up the stairs into the treehouse to show it off, Dean and Castiel finally are given permission to go off on their own. Sammy and Jo whine and cry about not being allowed to go back up into the treehouse with Dean and Castiel, both of them showing their younger age by being exhausted from all the heat and excitement of the day, as well as lack of an afternoon nap. But Dean is relieved when Mary and Ellen are insistent that the younger children remain with the adults. It’s not that Dean doesn’t want Sammy to enjoy the treehouse too, and Jo actually is pretty cool for a little girl; it’s just that this treehouse is extra special for Dean and Castiel, since they helped build it and all, and he wants their first evening in it, especially this evening, to be just for him and his best friend.

They wriggle up the rope that dangles from the hole in the middle of the house, Dean going first, and when he reaches the top he looks down to make sure Castiel doesn’t need any help. He doesn’t, of course, because he may be scrawny but he’s strong, maybe even stronger than Dean, though Dean would never admit that out loud. Once they’re both safely up top, they stand there and
look at their surroundings, and when Dean’s gaze lands on Castiel he sees that his friend has a goofy grin across his face, matching his own giddy smile.

Dean walks the few steps over to the surprise that Bobby brought them: a large telescope, set up behind a window near an opening in the branches of the tree. His dad had situated this window perfectly because it affords them a clear view of the night sky, and he promised Dean that as the tree grows, he’ll cut back the leaves so that they will always have an unobstructed view. A telescope is something Dean never would have thought of for his treehouse, but now that he has it he can’t imagine being up here without one. He’s already got his mom to promise to take them to the library next week so that he can check out some astronomy books.

“Dean, it’s almost time!” Castiel says, excitedly.

Dean had gotten so wrapped up in trying to figure out the adjustments on the telescope that he’d not noticed the growing darkness. Both boys crowd together onto the wooden bench in front of the window on the opposite side of the house, staring out into the field behind the backyard. They both wait silently, watching as the last rays of the sun are extinguished in the horizon, and they hold their breaths, listening to the quiet.

The loud boom that breaks through the silence makes them both jump, Dean letting loose a shriek that he will deny to his grave. Suddenly, the sky is lit up, white and pink sparks rocketing through the sky as the first fireworks are shot off. Being this high up in the trees they have the perfect view for the neighborhood fireworks display, and Dean raises the window to let in the warm, humid breeze. The smell of black powder, sulfur, and smoke in the air is oddly comforting to him, feeling familiar in a way.

He and Castiel lean against the window frame, their arms propped along the edge, watching as each neighbor tries to outdo the other with their displays. Dean cackles when one neighbor can’t seem to get any of his lit, and Castiel gasps at the ones that light up so bright that it feels as if they’ll burn their eyes out if they don’t squeeze them shut. They watch until they’re both yawning, finally starting to feel the effects of the excitement and length of the day. They decide without words to unroll their slumber bags and watch the rest of the fireworks from the floor of the treehouse, staring up through the large window at the sky through the leaves of the tree.

They can see more explosions than they’d expected through the heavy foliage, but it’s still not much compared to the window, and they both start to lose interest as a result. Dean pulls a flashlight from his bag, and asks Cas to show him some of his drawings, and they roll in laughter when Castiel shows him the picture he’d drawn of Jo riding a butterfly.

“She punched me hard in the arm, but it was worth it,” Castiel jokes.

“"I was pretty proud of that one,” Castiel replies, scooting forward so that he can lie down. “Although, when Missouri found out what I’d done, she made me apologize. I was gonna apologize anyways,” he mutters, and Dean can see him shrugging in the moonlight peeking through the leaves.

Settling themselves into their sleeping bags, they both grow quiet, listening to the breeze dancing through the trees and the distant voices of neighbors not ready to end the holiday festivities. Dean lets his glance land on the shadows throughout the treehouse, taking in everything and still not really believing what he sees. He never would have thought he could have something like this; not
unless they’d moved to a home that already had a treehouse. But even then, it wouldn’t have been the same as what he has now, because this… this is something permanent, built specially for him. He’s not really sure he understands why this is so important to him, other than it’s a promise he never knew he wanted.

Dean feels a tear slide down his cheek, not realizing he was crying until now. He reaches up to wipe it away but stops himself, not wanting to reveal the tears to Castiel. But he can’t help sniffling as his nose begins to run, and he can feel Castiel grow very still in the sleeping bag next to him. His friend doesn’t say anything though, and Dean is grateful for it. Castiel always seems to just know how to act with Dean.

As the night air slowly begins to lose a bit of its edge from the stifling heat, Dean can’t keep his eyes open any longer, and he starts to drift to sleep. Just as he’s on the edge of consciousness, Castiel stirs, shifting to lie on his side, facing Dean.

“I’m glad I met you, Dean Winchester,” Castiel whispers, and Dean can feel a finger tugging on the corner of his sleeping bag.

Dean is quiet for several minutes, listening to the song of the night birds who finally decided to be brave after the noises of the fireworks. He thinks about how much his life has changed these first couple months of moving to Kansas, and how happy he’s been, and how most of that is because of his new friend.

“Me too, Cas,” he whispers back, and falls asleep.
Chapter 4

*And now the music divides*
*Us into tribes*
*You grew your hair so I grew mine*
*They said the past won’t rest*
*Until we jump the fence and leave it behind*

~Arcade Fire, “Suburban War”

_Sixteen years old_

“Hey, Winchester, your girlfriend’s lookin’ for you!”

Dean slams his locker shut, and looks over his shoulder, eyebrow raised at the owner of the voice behind him. “Since when is Coach Taft my girlfriend? I think he’s a little old for me,” he jokes. He pauses in stuffing books into his backpack, contemplating his words. “Although those dentures might come in handy…”

“Boy, you just ain’t right in the head, anybody ever told you that before?” Victor shudders as he leans back against the wall of lockers.

Dean smirks, zipping his backpack and slinging it onto his shoulder. “Tell me something I don’t hear every day, Henrickson.”

“Okay, how ’bout this: Rumor has it Ellie’s decided after your date last week that she’s gonna give you her ‘most precious gift,’ or some shit like that,” Victor says, grinning.

“Her ‘most precious gift’? What, like her iMac?” Dean snorts. He starts walking down the hall, and motions for Victor to follow.

Henrickson strolls after him, pulling on his varsity jacket and high-fiving friends as they make their way towards homeroom. “No, Einstein, she plans on riding you like one of her prized stallions. Except in a sexy way.”

“Ellie riding things is _always_ sexy,” Dean quips, rubbing the back of his neck as he feels it flushing red.

“Yeah, yeah, smartass, you know what I mean,” Victor retorts. “So?”

Dean side-eyes him. “So what?”

Victor rolls his eyes. “So, when are you gonna ask her out again? All it’ll take is setting up a time and a place and you’ll be rid of your V-chip forever, my friend.”

Dean shakes his head, making a right into the narrow hallway leading to homeroom. “I dunno, man. I mean, she’s hot and all, but—”
“Dude, if you say what I think you’re about to say, then I have to tell you I will insist on putting out an APB for your balls.”

Dean stops in front of the locker room door, rubbing his hand across his face. “Fuck, Vic, I just… she’s just… she’s a little too eager, you know? It’s kind of a turn-off.” He watches as some of their teammates stroll past, greeting them, and doing his best to avoid Victor’s incredulous stare.

“Man, I don’t get you,” Victor scoffs. “You broke up with Jo after only a couple weeks—”

“Dude, it was like dating my sister!”

“—you broke up with Lisa just as you claimed things were gettin’ hot and heavy—”

“She kept talking about what our kids would look like, it was creepy as shit—”

“—and you’ve got practically the entire cheerleading squad panting after you. What gives, man? Do you prefer hot dogs to tacos, is that it?”

Dean groans. “Dude, that’s gross, and possibly sexist, I’m not sure.” He pauses to check out one of the aforementioned cheerleaders as she glides by, smiling and winking at him. “And no, I’m not gay. I’m just, I’ve got a lot going on right now, and I kinda wanna just take things easy for a while.”

Victor stares at him, eyebrow raised. “Whatever, Winchester. I’m just sayin’, if you’ve got a crush on me, it’s not like anybody would blame you.”

Dean laughs and shoves his friend down the hall. “Shut the fuck up, Victor. No one will ever understand our love.”

They say their goodbyes as Victor strolls a few doors down the hallway to homeroom while Dean takes a seat inside his own dingy classroom. As embarrassing as the conversation had been, he’s grateful for the momentary distraction of what had been weighing on his mind. It’d been a tense morning at home after Dean broached the subject of him getting a car now that he has his license.

Rationally, Dean understands why both his mom and dad bristle and worry whenever the topic is brought up. It’s not like he’s given them any reason to trust him lately. He knows he’s not been dependable, and lately it seems like he’s on restriction more often than not. The day he started hanging out with Andy and his slacker friends was not one of his smarter choices in life, but he’d been needing some kind of release, and he was tired of trying so hard to fit in with other crowds in school. So when Andy had offered him a joint at one of the few parties where the slacker crowd and the jocks overlapped, it seemed like a door was swinging open to a freer way to be, and he jumped through it without giving it much consideration.

And he’d been doing a fine job of hiding his extracurricular activities from his family, or at least he thought so. In retrospect, the worried looks he could feel his parents throwing his way every so often were clues that he wasn’t being as stealthy as he’d hoped. And the night he’d rode his bicycle home drunk off his ass, and puked on the foyer floor as soon as he’d closed the door behind him, was not one of his finer moments.

So Dean understands why the parental reins are so tight around him lately, but he can’t help the resentment he feels, all the same. He knows he can’t blame his parents completely for him feeling stifled, but it doesn’t help that they want so much for him to fit into one of the “approved” circles
in school. No matter how hard he tries to squeeze himself into what’s expected of him though, he
knows deep down it’s not what he wants, and he will never fit in, not the way his family expects.

Dean watches as other students hurry into the classroom before the final bell rings with an ear-
popping shrill. He looks down at his notebook, and begins to scribble lyrics to the Zeppelin song
that’s been stuck in his head ever since he woke up. He listens distractedly as the teacher starts roll
call, and tries to remember if he did all his algebra homework from yesterday or if he’ll have to try
to sneak it in during American History. Just as he’s about to doze off to the drone of the teacher’s
nasal monotone, he hears her clear her throat and whisper to someone who just entered the
classroom.

“Excuse me, everyone… it seems we have a new student to introduce. Everyone, this is
Casteel Novak, transferring here from—where did you say—ah yes, from Host Academy.”

Dean’s head whips up so fast he wouldn’t be surprised if he gets whiplash, and his body jerks
involuntarily, flinging his notebook and pencil across the aisle. The noise and movement grabs the
attention of the person standing at the teacher’s desk, and Dean gasps as his gaze meets familiar
blue. Castiel’s eyes widen a bit at the recognition, and his upper lip twitches into a tiny smirk, most
likely because Dean’s mouth is gaping open like a fish out of water.

“Mr. Novak, why don’t you take a seat here in the front row, and if you have any questions about
your schedule, I can assist you once roll call is complete,” Ms. Channing says.

“Yes, ma’am,” Castiel replies, meeting Dean’s stare once more before sitting in an empty desk at
the front of the class.

Dean gathers his wits long enough to reach down and collect his notebook and pencil off the floor,
but all thoughts of Zeppelin songs and algebra homework are forgotten. He stares at the back of his
friend’s head so hard and for so long he’s surprised he doesn’t bore a hole into Castiel's skull, and
the amount of time it takes for the bell to ring to release them for first period is excruciating, when
all he wants to do is stalk over to Castiel and ask him what the hell is going on.

Dean is up and out of his seat the second the bell begins to trill, so fast that he’s made it across the
room and is standing in front of Castiel’s desk before anyone else has even stood up. He stares
down at his friend, waiting for Castiel to zip his backpack and acknowledge his presence. As soon
as he stands, Dean grabs his arm and pulls him out of the room and into the hallway, against a bank
of lockers and out of the way of the walking masses.

“Dude…what the fuck are you doing here?” The words are harsher than Dean intended, and he
feels chastened when he sees the hurt look on Castiel’s face.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel replies, his voice terse. “I’m attending school, obviously.”

Dean sighs and takes a step closer, lowering his voice so that he can speak more softly. “Cas, man,
I can see that. But…what happened? Why did you transfer?”

The noisy bustle of students rushing past seems to distract Castiel for a moment as he looks away,
his expression annoyed. “We don’t have time to talk about this right now, Dean.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, we never have time for anything anymore.”

Castiel’s gaze darts back quickly to Dean, and Dean squirms as he feels his friend watching him
closely, but he ignores the feeling for the moment. “First period warning bell is about to ring, where’s your first class?”

Castiel looks down at the slip of paper clasped in his hand. “I…I don’t know. It’s AP Biology, wherever that is.”

Dean grabs the paper from Castiel’s hand and scours over the schedule. “Yeah, that’s two hallways down, past the cafeteria,” he mumbles. “Looks like the only class we share is homeroom. No surprise there, since you take all the Advanced Placement classes anyways.”

“Oh,” Castiel replies quietly. “What about lunch period?”

“Yeah, we don’t share that either,” Dean states, disappointed. “But hey, you’ve got first lunch, so you’ll get first choice of food, that’s always good, right?”

Castiel smiles. “I think you’re the only person who cares that much about which lunch period they get.”

“Oh, trust me, you’ll be grateful on Mexican pizza day, by third lunch there’s never any left, and that’s a moment that will make you cry,” Dean jokes, jumping as the bell stationed above them begins to ring.

He grabs Castiel’s shoulder and begins to walk him up the hallway. “You better get going. Take a left at the end of the hall, and your room will be two hallways over.”

Castiel begins to stride away, but he stops and turns around when Dean calls after him. “Hey Cas, my friend Charlie is in first lunch, I’ll tell her to look out for you so you have somebody to sit with, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you, Dean,” Castiel calls out, turning away to head to his first class.

Dean watches him as he walks away and turns the corner. He stares at the empty space for several seconds, feeling weird and unsure about what just happened, wondering what it means to have Castiel going to the same school. He’d stopped hoping for this to happen years ago, and he’d gotten used to having his own life here, completely separate from his friendship with Castiel. Now, having these two identities unexpectedly colliding, he’s not sure how to deal with it.

But he’s kind of eager to find out, excited in a way that he hasn’t felt in a long, long time.

He yelps when the tardy bell screams above his head, and curses himself for wasting so much time and being late to class again. Some things never change.

Dean finally gets a moment to sneak a text message to Charlie, giving her a head’s up about Castiel. The two have never met before, and Dean feels a bit guilty about it. He’s always tried to keep his friendship with Charlie on the DL at school because if it got out that he’s a gamer he’d never be able to live it down with his teammates. He hates having to keep it a secret, especially because, other than his time spent with Castiel, it’s his favorite thing to do, and it’s about the only
time he feels comfortable in his own skin.

But he’s at least told Charlie about Castiel before, bragging on his friend for knowing more on just about every topic imaginable, more than even Charlie does, though she seemed less than amused at hearing that anyone could best her in strategy or swordplay, let alone a guy. So when he texts her about Castiel, he’s able to keep it short, which is convenient since if he gets caught one more time using his phone during class they’ll be making a call to his parents, and the last thing he needs right now is more fodder for family fights.

Hey pippi, cas transferd, goes hre now and hes in ur lunch, Dean transmits with a grin.

Dude I told u dont call me pippi zips back within ten seconds.

Whtevr will u pls look out fr him and let him sit w u at lunch? Dean returns, and he can picture the smirk on Charlie’s face when she replies.

How much is it wrth to u?

Ill get u phn nmbr of that cute cheerleadr Dean taps back.

Its a deal suckr :D

Feeling a bit better now that he knows someone at least will be looking out for Cas during lunch period, Dean tries to concentrate during English. He realizes it’s a losing battle once his eyes begin to drift closed while the teacher goes on and on about *Call of the Wild*. He wakes up at the end of the class, after an uneasy dream about wolves attacking their school. He’s so cold he’s shivering, and he’s faceplanted in a disgusting pool of his own drool on the desktop.

He sits up, surreptitiously wiping the saliva off his face as he watches his classmates leave the room. He shoves his books into his backpack, doing his best to go unnoticed by Mrs. Pickens standing at her desk.

“Mr. Winchester, if this class was meant for sleeping we’d have made the desks a lot more comfortable,” she calls out.

Dammit.

Dean clears his throat and slides out of his seat. “Yes, ma’am.”

The young teacher frowns at him over the stack of papers littered across her desk. “I know you find school boring as hell, but can you at least pretend to stay awake just in case one of my superiors happens to peek in? You’re going to get me in trouble, and I am way too easy on you for you to do me that way.”

“I know, Mrs. Pickens, I’m sorry, it won’t happen again,” Dean mumbles, turning to walk out the door and on to his next class. Before he can think better of it, he stops himself and turns around to look back at her. “Why *doyou* go easy on me?” he asks, curiosity getting the better of him.

He watches as the teacher sighs and purses her lips, staring at him for a moment as if deliberating what to say. “Because you’re a smart kid and a great writer.” She watches him as Dean can feel himself blushing at the compliment, before adding, “And I can tell you like to write, even though you try to hide it. You should think about giving it a shot as a career.”
Dean shifts his bookbag from one shoulder to the other, uneasy with getting compliments, especially from a teacher.

“Well, go on with you, then, before I change my mind about you and make you stay after school writing essays for a week,” Mrs. Pickens says, waving him out of the room.

This time, Dean doesn’t hesitate to escape.

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Dean decides to skip the after-school workout session with the baseball team, opting instead to wait for Charlie at her car. He wants to get the scoop from her on how things went with Castiel at lunch, especially since he’s not seen Cas since homeroom. He’d texted Cas a few times throughout the day, but his friend, as expected, hadn’t answered him. If Castiel even remembered to bring his phone to school, odds are he doesn’t have it powered on, his phone being one of the few things about which Castiel is scatter-brained.

Castiel’s phone silence was not a surprise, but his presence by Charlie’s side as she hurries up to her car is unexpected.

For the second time that day, Dean finds himself staring at Castiel with his mouth gaping wide. “Uhhhh, hey?” He manages to mutter, as eloquently as is possible while looking like a guppy.

“Hey man, you didn’t tell me how awesome Castiel is!” Charlie gushes as she runs up to Dean. “I mean, I know you said he was a gamer, but I had no clue he was into Moondoor, too.”

Dean raises an eyebrow, his glance bouncing back and forth between Charlie and Castiel, who has steadily avoided his gaze ever since they arrived. “Into what-door?”

Charlie rolls her eyes, unlocking the passenger door of her beat-up Sentra. “Moon-door, dumbass. You know, the RPG that you keep teasing me about yet secretly move my miniatures around for better battlefield strategy when my back is turned?”

Dean stares down at her smug face. “Yeah, yeah, okay. You still can’t place your archers for shit.” He looks back over at Castiel, who’s leaning against the side of the car with his hands in his pockets. The weather hasn’t warmed up much since the snowstorm last week, and the gray skies only serve to bring out the color in his friend’s eyes more, as does the blue of his jacket.

“So, when were you going to tell me about you transferring? Were you gonna wait until graduation day?” Dean knows he sounds like an asshole, but he can’t help himself. He’s worked himself up all day into feeling hurt that Castiel hadn’t bothered to tell him about transferring beforehand, wondering if it didn’t even matter to Cas that they’d finally be going to the same school.

“Can you wait and have your PMS later? I’ve only just convinced Castiel to let me drive him home instead of riding his bike,” Charlie says, throwing her bag into the backseat of her car and climbing into the driver’s seat.

“You were gonna ride your bike home? Dude, that’s like ten miles! It’s colder than a penguin’s left nipple out here,” Dean exclaims in disbelief.
Castiel finally looks at Dean, giving him a stare that drops the temperature around them at least twenty degrees colder, if possible. “Dean, you know how I feel about riding in cars,” he mumbles, climbing into the backseat and slamming the door. He waits until Dean is settled in the seat in front of him before continuing. “I don’t like feeling so…confined,” he finishes, lamely.

“You, well, a little confinement is better than fucking frostbite,” Dean retorts. “How the hell did you get Missouri to let you ride your bike, anyways?”

He hears Castiel sigh in the seat behind him as Charlie backs out of the parking space. “Missouri is out of town this week because her cousin is ill.”

Dean has to grind his teeth together to keep them from chattering because Charlie turned the heater on full-blast, which means it’s blowing arctic wind at him until the heat decides to actually kick in. “Well, if I catch you doing it again, I’ll call Missouri myself and tattle on you,” Dean yells above the noise of the heater, a triumphant smile on his face when he turns around to see the stricken look Castiel is throwing at him.

“You wouldn’t,” Castiel dares.

“You know I would, Cas, don’t make me do it,” Dean threatens.

Castiel huffs and stares at Dean, eyes narrowing, before he turns his head to look out the window. Dean grins in victory, turning around to face the front, and catching Charlie watching him with a smirk on her face.

“What?” Dean asks, suspicious.

“Nothing,” Charlie replies, shaking her head. Dean notices the smirk doesn’t leave her face, but he lets it go for now. “So, who am I taking home first?”

There’s no response from the backseat, so Dean speaks up for both of them. “Why don’t you just drop both of us off at my house? I can take Cas home later.” He turns to make eye contact with Castiel again. “Mom’s been bugging the hell out of me to get you to come over for dinner, so I don’t think you’re gonna have much choice.”

Castiel smiles briefly and nods. “I’d like that.”

Charlie pulls up to the front of the school to pick up Castiel’s bike from the bike rack, and then they’re on their way. The drive to Dean’s house only takes a few more minutes, and after they’ve said their goodbyes to Charlie they hurry into the house, getting out of the chilly afternoon air as quickly as possible. When Mary sees Castiel, she grabs hold of him so tightly that Dean wonders if he’ll need the Jaws of Life to pry her loose, and Dean laughs at the look of fear on Castiel’s face when he realizes she’s not letting go anytime soon.

“Mom, I think even saints need air, let the poor guy breathe,” Dean kids.

“Oh, Dean, hush!” Mary scolds, but she does finally loosen her grip on his friend. “I just haven’t seen Castiel in so long,” she continues, brushing a lock of hair off Castiel’s forehead. “We’ve all missed you so much, sweetie. How have you been?”

Castiel’s cheeks are flushed, and Dean can’t tell if it’s from the warmth of the house, the tightness
of his mom’s embrace, or the intensity of Mary’s affection for him. Dean is reminded yet again that, no matter how awesome Missouri is, it’s not the same as feeling that love from a parent, and in that moment he wishes he could beat the shit out of Castiel’s asshole of a father.

“I’ve been fine, Mrs. Winchester,” Castiel replies. “How have you been? And Mr. Winchester?”

“Oh, we’ve been well enough, I suppose. Busy worrying over Dean, here,” she says, shooting a pointed look at Dean.

Yeah, just couldn’t keep from getting that little dig in, Dean thinks. “Yeah, well, maybe you won’t worry so much now that Cas will be going to the same school,” Dean retorts.

Mary’s eyes go wide in surprise. “What?! Castiel, have you transferred to Lawrence High?”

If looks could kill, Dean would be a charred shell of his former self due to the withering stare Castiel shoots him. “Yes, ma’am, today was my first day there.”

“But why? I thought you were doing so well at Host Academy!”

“Yes, I was. But I uh…I wasn’t happy there. I didn’t feel as if I fit in,” Castiel states.

Mary watches him, a worried look painted across her features. “I’m sure your father wasn’t too happy at the thought of you transferring, though. What did he have to say about all of this?”

Castiel shakes his head, avoiding her eyes. “No, ma’am, he wasn’t happy. But he finally relented, after a while.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry you weren’t happy there,” Mary murmurs, hugging Castiel again, a little less forcefully this time. “But maybe you’ll enjoy Lawrence High more. You’ll have Dean there, after all!”

Dean decides this is the perfect moment to intervene and save his friend. “Yep, and he and I need to have a little pow wow so I can give him the low down on the ins and outs of that place, so we’re gonna go up to my room for a bit until dinner, if that’s okay, Mom.”

Mary nods as Dean grabs the sleeve of Castiel’s jacket and begins to haul him up the stairs. “Sure, honey, that’s fine, your chores can wait until after dinner. And Castiel, sweetie, I baked your favorite cookies this morning, if you want to grab a plate before you go upstairs.”

Dean swears he can see Castiel’s ears perk at this news. “Peanut Butter Chocolate Chip?” Castiel calls out, hopefully.

“The very ones,” Mary smiles.

“Thank you, Mrs. Winchester!” Castiel makes a beeline back down the stairs and into the kitchen, Dean lumbering behind him, as he knows that Cas won’t be happy unless he’s got a giant glass of milk to wash the cookies down, and there’s no way he’d be able to carry all that and his books at once.

Mary leans up to kiss Dean on the temple as he walks by. “There’s still a slice of cherry pie in there too, if you want it, hon.”
“It’s like you know me or something, Mom,” Dean teases.

“Shush, and help your friend,” she admonishes.

Once they're safely ensconced in his room, Dean confronts Castiel. “So, ’fess up, man. What’s really going on?”

Castiel chokes on his mouthful of cookie. “You can’t even wait until I’m done chewing?” he asks, voice muffled through the crumbs.

Dean shakes his head, sitting down on the bed next to his friend. “Cas, I’ve been waiting all day to find out what’s up with you. Talk to me.”

He watches Castiel side-eye him as he takes a big gulp of milk, and patiently waits while he wipes the milk mustache away with the back of his hand.

Finally, Castiel clears his throat. “Dean, I never really said much about what it was like at my school.”

Dean shrugs. “Yeah, I know. I just figured it was because there wasn’t much to say.”

He watches as Castiel rubs at the hem of his shirt, concentrating way too hard on the seam. “There wasn’t, really. But I’ve not been happy there for quite a while. I didn’t feel like I belonged anywhere. All the other students come from rich families—”

“—you come from a rich family,” Dean interjects.

Castiel rolls his eyes. “Yeah, but I’m not a spoiled, entitled brat like they all are.”

Dean nods his head in the affirmative. “True, I’ll give you that, I guess,” he agrees, cheekily.

“Thank you for conceding that I’m not an asshole,” Castiel huffs.

“Hey, I said nothing about you not being an asshole, just that you weren’t a spoiled brat,” Dean replies, dodging the slap to the back of the head that Castiel throws his way, but not fast enough to miss the pinch to his side. “Ow, dude, you know how much I fucking hate that!”

Castiel grins, toeing off his shoes and flopping back onto the bed. He stares up at the ceiling for a moment before continuing. “I just figured, I’m in high school, I should be having fun, not feeling miserable, surrounded by people I can’t stand and have nothing in common with.”

“Cas, I don’t know if maybe you missed the memo, but that’s the exact definition of what high school is,” Dean jokes. “And Lawrence High isn’t any better, I don’t think. Same shit, different people.”

He lies down on the bed next to Castiel, scooting close enough that their shoulders are touching. They both stare up, their eyes following the patterns of the stars and planets they’d so painstakingly
applied to the ceiling when they were twelve years old. Dean takes a deep breath and closes his eyes, savoring the moment. It’s been too long since they’ve hung out together like this; weeks, maybe even months.

Castiel clears his throat, and Dean waits for him to speak. The house is quiet for the moment, Sam not having yet made it off the bus, and John still not home from work. The sounds from outside are still muffled a bit from the dirty snow left on the ground from last week’s storm, and Dean can feel a warm breeze across his arm as the heater kicks on.

“I just…” Castiel pauses, as if he’s unsure of how to say what’s on his mind. “I just think, even if it’s the same as my old school, at least we’ll be in it together, right?” His voice fades into a whisper, and Dean turns his head to find eyes wide and staring back at him, a look of uncertainty marring his friend’s face.

They stare at each other for a moment before Dean thinks to ask, “Cas, why didn’t you tell me before that you were thinking about doing this? Or tell me when you realized it was going to happen?”

Castiel turns his head, looks back up at the ceiling, his eyes steady and fixed on the protoplanetary nebula he’d insisted on painting when they were younger, after he’d read about them in one of his astronomy books. When Dean had teased him about it, Castiel just shrugged, said that it resembled what he’d imagine an angel to look like, and this way an angel would be watching over Dean when he couldn’t be there himself. Dean had blushed and shrugged it off, but secretly he liked the idea of someone caring enough to paint a weird-ass star thing that looks like an angel on his ceiling to watch over him.

Castiel narrows his eyes as he continues to stare up at the fake stars, ignoring the look that Dean is leveling at the side of his face. “I was afraid if I told you, you’d try to talk me out of it.”

Dean opens his mouth to negate what Castiel has said, to tell him, *of course I wouldn’t have done that Cas, I would have begged you to do it*, but he’s not so sure it’s true. Because things have been so weird between them, and have been for a while. If he’s honest they’ve been this way probably since they first started high school. And that brings his mind to something he doesn’t want to remember or think too hard about, so he tries to steer himself to safer pastures, tries to figure out why the thought of Cas being in the same school makes him feel confused and uneasy, why the thought of trying to mesh these two aspects of himself together seems so difficult.

“Dean,” Castiel starts carefully, “what’s been going on with you lately?”

Dean turns his head to find Castiel staring back at him, eyes narrow. “What do you mean?” he asks, suspiciously. “What have you heard?”

Castiel shrugs, the movement awkward against the comforter of the bed. “I dunno, just that you’ve been…going through some stuff.”

“Who tattled?” Dean groans. “Did my mom tell Missouri?”

Castiel shakes his head. “No, I don’t think Missouri knows anything about it. Sam called me a few weeks ago, and—”

“Of course it was Sammy, that little shithead,” Dean growls. *Jesus fucking Christ*, a guy can’t get drunk and puke all over his parents’ floor right in front of them without his brat kid brother
“Dean,” Castiel says sternly, “Sam was worried about you, *is* worried about you. He didn’t know what else to do.”

And suddenly, everything becomes crystal clear. Dean raises up onto one elbow, leaning over to stare incredulously at his friend. “Oh my god, is this is why you transferred to Lawrence High? To babysit me?”

“What?” Castiel blurts back. “Dean, *no!* I was wanting and planning this long before Sam told me what happened! My transferring had nothing to do with that.”

Dean stares down at Castiel, looking for any signs that his friend is lying, but finds none. He collapses back down onto the bedspread, muttering, “Okay, fine. Just remember I don’t need a babysitter. I can take care of myself.”

They lie in silence for several moments before Castiel speaks up again. “You never did explain what the deal was, though.”

Dean lets loose an exasperated sigh. “Dammit, Cas…I dunno. I just…it seemed like a good idea at the time, I guess.”

He waits to see if Castiel is going to call him out on the bullshit of that answer, but when he’s only met with silence he continues. “You know how you said you don’t really feel like you belonged at your old school? Well, that’s kinda how I feel everywhere. I just – I don’t feel comfortable. *Anywhere.*” He pauses for a second before adding, “except for when I’m around you, I guess.”

He can feel Castiel go very still next to him, and it takes him a moment to realize he’s holding his own breath, though he doesn’t know why.

“Well, at least we always have that. We’re a team, right?” Castiel says quietly, shoulder bumping softly against Dean’s.

Dean sighs quietly, remembering how they always said it to each other as kids before they did something crazy together. He’s relieved to feel a tiny piece of their friendship slot back into its place after so long.

“Yeah, Cas. You jump, I jump,” Dean whispers, smiling softly to himself.

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The next several weeks turn into months that all run together into one giant blur. Dean’s schedule becomes hectic because of baseball tryouts and then the regular season. He’s feeling the pressure both from his dad and from teammates to work out and interact more with the team, and he goes along with it because he *does* enjoy playing baseball, though not as much as others would like him to, and because it’s much easier just to shut up and do what’s expected than to try and explain that sometimes there are other things he’d rather be doing.

Even though they’re now attending the same school, Dean doesn’t see much more of Castiel than
he did before, other than every morning in homeroom. He’d been relieved at first, when he realized that Castiel going to Lawrence High didn’t mean his friend would be attached at the hip, wondering why Dean was distant and not including him in everything. In actuality, the opposite has been true, so far. Castiel has been finding his own way around the school, educationally and socially, not even once asking for help from Dean. He just kind of keeps his head down and does his own thing, finding friends and a place to fit in along the way.

Dean notices that Castiel doesn’t seem to have any trouble joining in with the artsy, hipster circles in school, or maybe it’d be more accurate to say they found him. It’s kind of hard not to notice someone with the kind of talent Castiel has, so Dean wouldn’t be surprised at all if that clique begins to follow him around like the sheep they so desperately try not to be.

But Castiel, as always, is completely clueless in the ways of school clique politics, so he begins to float from one social circle to the other, never caring enough what others think of him to let himself feel pigeon-holed into staying in one group. Dean watches as one day finds him hanging with the art kids, while the next he’s off with Charlie and Alfie, heads bent low over notebooks as they plot their strategy for an upcoming game. One day, Dean is even shocked to find Castiel chatting with Andy Gallagher and some of the other stoners in the hallway outside the lunchroom, and when he does his best to casually stroll by to discover what they’re talking about, he hears something about quantum physics or some other shit that he has no clue about.

Dean watches. And as he’s keeping his distance and observing, his relief at not having Castiel smothering him and clinging to him slowly gives way to dismay, worry, and eventually hurt at the fact his best friend doesn’t seem to want to have anything to do with him anymore. They used to talk shit all the time when they were little kids about how awesome it would be if they were going to the same school, and now that they have the chance to finally hang out more, Castiel seems farther away than ever.

Summer vacation sneaks up on them, and Dean’s hopes for hanging out with Castiel like old times are dashed when Castiel informs him on the first day of break that his father is sending him off on a retreat for gifted kids for the entire summer.

“A retreat?” Dean snorts. “Sounds more like a brainwashing camp, to me. Is he still trying to convince you to go to med school?”

Castiel winces at Dean’s words. “He just wants the best for me, Dean. And I owe him a lot for that.”

Dean scoffs, rolling his eyes and refusing to meet Castiel’s steely glare. “You don’t owe him shit, Cas. And you especially don’t owe him your life, which is what you’d be giving him if you agree to go to school for something you don’t even want to do.”

Sighing, Castiel turns to step back inside his house. “Maybe I do want to become a doctor. You don’t know. I don’t know, either, which is why I agreed to this retreat.” He opens the door, turning around to face Dean before stepping inside. “But I am sorry I didn’t tell you about this before. You just were so preoccupied with baseball and your other friends, I didn’t think it’d be that big of a deal.”

And yeah, that kind of hurts, but at the same time, it warms Dean’s heart a bit that maybe Castiel isn’t so indifferent about them not hanging out more in school as he’d seemed. Dean hops the couple of steps up to the doorway, leaning over to shove gently at Castiel’s arm, and grabbing onto his shoulder. “Dude, no matter what happens, I’ll always consider my summers as yours, so if
something comes up that keeps us from hanging out, it’s always a big deal. Who else is gonna save me from Furdition, right?’

He chuckles and squeezes Castiel’s shoulder, moving to pull away, but stops when Castiel reaches up and places a hand on his upper arm. They stare at each other for several long moments, and Dean’s heart skips a beat against his chest like a bird fluttering against its cage as he senses a tension between them, something he has only felt the shadows of before. It’s not entirely unpleasant, but it is utterly confusing.

“I’ll always be here to save you from furry beasts and other dangers, Dean,” Castiel replies, a soft smile playing on his lips.

Dean can feel his cheeks flushing, but he reaches up to squeeze Castiel’s hand anyways because damn, as girly as he feels right now, it’s awesome to hear that Castiel still is here for him, even if he was kind of joking. “Don’t ever change, Cas,” he murmurs, and waves goodbye to his friend as he closes the door.

It’s going to be a long summer without him.

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The summer apart could have been cut short about two weeks before school starts back. Castiel returns home from his retreat early, but misses Dean by three days. The Winchester family takes a rare vacation, going on a road trip to the Grand Canyon, and the only thing that dampens Dean’s enthusiasm is the knowledge that he could have spent some time with his best friend before school starts.

The vacation is sorely needed for their entire family though, and Dean is grateful for the chance to hang out with Sammy and his parents without the distraction of everyday life. Things have been tense in their family for a while now, and Dean doesn’t understand most of the whys for it, but he can’t help feeling as though he’s responsible for some of it. His bad choice of friends and alcoholic extracurricular activities sprouted a lot of arguments in his family, some of which Dean wasn’t even a part of, but he could still hear his parents’ raised voices as they fought late into the night.

Dean doesn’t really care about getting in trouble; the way he sees it, it’s just a part of being a teenager. What he hates about the whole experience is the look of disappointment in his mother’s eyes, and knowing that he caused a rift between his parents. Deep down, he suspects that rift existed between them before he ever did anything wrong, but that does nothing to assuage the guilt from knowing that he’s become a sore spot between them.

Another result of the vacation is the awakening of wanderlust within Dean. This is the first real road trip that he’s been on since the family moved to Lawrence years ago, and he had no idea how much he’d missed it until they’d pulled away from Lawrence city limits, hit the highway, and kept on going. The realization that this is what he’d been yearning for all those times he felt an itch across his skin and a need for something else, something more, hits him like a bag of bricks when John rolls the driver’s side window down, letting in a gust of warm summer air.

This is it, Dean thinks, leaning forward in the back seat and laying his arms across the top of the seat in front of him. He stares out the windshield at the road opening up before them, feeling déjà vu as he remembers looking out this same windshield on a day not unlike this one all those years
ago. *This is what I’ve been missing.*

With his goofy kid brother next to him and his parents in the front seat, the only other thing Dean needs in this moment is his friend to fill that Cas-shaped spot next to him.

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Junior year starts off just like the beginnings of freshman and sophomore years, except for the fact that Castiel is there, too. And unfortunately, it’s a lot like the end of sophomore year, too. Dean and Castiel still don’t share any classes, and even though he did his damnedest to switch, Dean couldn’t get in on Castiel’s lunch period, either.

The whole first half of the school year, Dean still feels like a creeper, watching Castiel from across the hallways between classes, and making up excuses to pass by his locker. He tells himself he’s doing it just to check up on him, but deep down he knows there’s other reasons for it, especially since Cas is still doing fine on his own. He doesn’t let his brain delve too deeply into why he’s doing it; he’s missing his friend, and that’s all he needs to know right now.

The art kids take to Castiel just like Dean knew they would, and hang onto his every word like he’s a freaking messiah or something. Sometimes, when Dean strolls by the art room, he can feel some of the hipster kids staring at him and whispering, but he just stays long enough to get a look at Castiel, then turns tail and leaves. He considers asking them what their problem is, because hell, a jock can walk the art hall if he wants; but he figures it’s better to lay low than to have to explain why he’s really there.

They both do make an effort to hang out more outside of school, but it’s still not as much as Dean would like. Castiel takes so many advanced classes that he has to spend several hours studying most nights, and his weekends are spent catching up on what he didn’t have time for during the week. Dean is tempted at times to whine to Castiel about it, make him feel guilty for not making more time to spend with his friends (or hell, let’s be honest, Dean doesn’t give a shit whether Cas spends time with any other friends), but he knows once baseball season starts back up his attention will be focused elsewhere, as well.

What he doesn’t count on is his itch to try something different once school starts up after the Christmas holidays. Starting back to school after winter break is a whirlwind of activity, mostly focused on getting back into shape for baseball tryouts. But the more Dean works out with the team, the more bored he gets. His attention starts waning, and he longs for something else to do, anything that will get him away from the constant sports talk all the time.

He considers a wood-working class, since he loved building the treehouse so much years ago, but it’s too late to switch any of his classes now.

And then he remembers the RPG after-school club that Charlie got permission to start this semester. He’d not given much thought to joining it when she first started gibbering on about it, knowing that if word got out that he was into that kind of stuff it’d be a lot harder to avoid getting hassled by classmates. But now that he’s desperate for something to do for a few hours a week that has nothing to do with baseball, and once he finds out Castiel has joined the club, Dean decides to blow off an after-school gym session to sneak in and see what it’s all about.

When he strolls into Mr. Berry’s classroom where the meeting is held, he hears a gasp from behind him. He turns to find a weird dude from his English class staring up at him, eyes wide in shock.
Dean waits for him to say something, but when the guy just keeps staring, mouth opening and closing soundlessly, he rolls his eyes and turns back around.

“Corbett, I told you no more recruits unless we’ve personally vetted them first!” yells a guy sitting inside the classroom, leaning precariously on the two hind legs of his chair. The guy’s gaze looks Dean up and down with a very misguided air of superiority.

“Ed, I’m sorry! But, I mean, he’s, um, he’s not a recruit. Or, I mean, he’s not my recruit, he could be somebody else’s, but um, I’m still sorry, and here, I brought you a Strawberry Quik!” the guy behind Dean, Corbett, stammers.

Ed stands up and stalks over to Dean, obviously doing his damnedest to be intimidating but falling hilariously short of his mark. “Who are you and what is your purpose here?”

Dean smirks and stares down at the dude, holding back a laugh when the guy flinches as Dean raises his hand to scratch his chin. He opens his mouth to speak, but before he can, he hears Charlie call from the other side of the room, where she’s been occupied pinning a map up on the wall.

“Ed! Chill the frak out, that’s Dean, he’s my friend, and he has an open invitation to our meetings,” she scolds.

Dean shoves his hands in his pockets and leans back against the wall as Charlie finishes up with her map and comes over to stand in front of him. “What are you doing here, by the way?” she asks. “Don’t you have football practice or something?”

“It’s baseball, and yes, but I skipped it today,” Dean replies, eyes scanning the room.

“He’s not here,” Charlie smirks.

Dean’s head swivels back to Charlie, and he bristles defensively at the look on her face. “What? Who?” He tries to seem nonchalant, but he has a sinking feeling he comes off more as desperate.

“Um, the guy you’ve been sort of stalking since last year. You know, tall, blue eyes, kind of dreamy…” she answers.

“I haven’t been stalking him! I’ve just been keeping tabs on him, making sure he’s fitting in okay.” Even as the words are leaving his mouth, Dean knows he sounds shady as hell, and Charlie rolls her eyes and grabs a handful of his jacket, pulling him further into the room and pushing him over to a secluded corner. “Yeah, well, it’s been a year since he enrolled,” she reminds Dean, “and you’re being waaaay obvious, dude. I’m surprised you haven’t tried to get in our lunch period yet.”

Dean tenses at her words, wondering if she knows just how accurate she is. “Obvious about what? Charlie, Cas and I are just friends.”

She levels Dean with a look that could flatten Mount Everest. “Right. And I don’t have a thing for corset-covered cosplayers with big boobs.”

Dean can feel his face heating up, and his eyes land everywhere in the room but on her face. “Look, Charlie, I don’t know what you’ve heard or what you think you know,” he blusters, “but there’s nothing going on between me and Cas. We’ve been best friends forever, and it’s weird having him go to my school, so maybe that’s why I’m acting so strange, but that’s it. That’s all.”
Charlie sighs. “Okay. Well, you know, if you ever need to talk, I’m here, and—”

“Dude, save the after-school special speech for later, alright?” Dean cuts in. “I don’t need it right now. I just was missing my best friend, and I’ve been wanting to come to one of your meetings for a while now anyways, so I thought I’d stop by.”

“Yeah, well, Castiel was missing his best friend, too, which is why he’s not here.”

Dean stares at her for a few moments, waiting for her to elaborate. When she doesn’t, he rolls his hand in front of him to encourage her to finish what she’s saying. “What the hell is that supposed to mean, Charlie?”

She snorts. “Castiel is skipping today’s meeting so that he can sign up for baseball tryouts.”
Chapter 5

Now our lives are changing fast
Hope that something pure can last

~Arcade Fire, “We Used To Wait”

Twelve years old

The ease and happiness of Dean and Castiel’s first summer together bleeds into Dean’s first school year in Lawrence, as well as the following few years. Even though they don’t attend the same school, Dean and his friend see each other almost every day, and it’s enough to keep them happy, both rushing home each day after school, eager to tell the other anything new they may have seen or learned.

Before Lawrence, Dean hadn’t known what it was to have an extended family. He had grown up having only his immediate family surrounding him, only ever being able to rely on his parents and brother as his close-knit circle of support. But now, he’s beginning to understand the importance and necessity of letting outsiders into their family, of allowing himself to depend on and become attached to those not obligated to him by blood.

Accepting uncle Bobby, Ellen, Joanna Beth, Missouri, and Castiel into their lives was strange at first; at least it was for Dean. He had been so used to not allowing himself to become attached to people because he knew they’d be uprooting themselves and moving again soon. But now, now he can make plans with them, can talk to them of things that happened a few months previously and not have to explain what he’s talking about because they were there a few months ago. It provides a comfort he didn’t know he’d been craving.

The novelty of having a best friend does have its drawbacks, and Sam suffers the most from it. Dean knows he’s been brushing off spending as much time with his little brother as he did before moving to Lawrence, but he’s just been so wrapped up in the excitement of having a new friend that he avoids Sammy a lot of the time. Mary takes pity on them both, at first; pity on Dean for needing to spend time with his best friend, and pity on Sam for missing his big brother, and not having the good fortune of finding a friend of his own, aside from Joanna Beth, who more often than not claims she’s too big to play with little kids like Sam even though she’s only a couple years older.

Thankfully, one summer day Castiel unwittingly stumbles upon a solution to the problem. He and Dean run down the stairs and into the kitchen, where Sam is sitting at the breakfast table. Mary is attempting to get him to pay attention long enough to read a book, but he’s squirming in his seat, face already flushed with the heat of the morning. Dean and Castiel try to sneak through to the backyard, making as little noise as possible, but Sam spies them, and calls out, “Dean! Can I come? Please please PLEASE?”

He tries to jump from his seat, but Mary grabs his shoulders, holding him back. “Honey, I told you, you can’t go out and play until later. You need to practice reading right now, and your brother has other things to do.”
“But, mommy, I wanna play with Dean! He never plays with me anymore, I wanna go with him!” Sam’s eyes well up with fat tears threatening to spill over, his bottom lip quivering, and Dean stares at his little brother, his heart twisting painfully. *Those stupid tears and that stupid lip get me every time*, he thinks, standing there, not knowing what to say or do. He feels so guilty for not playing as much with Sam lately, but there’s no way they could go all the places they go if they’re dragging along a kid his age.

Castiel shifts beside Dean. “Sam, we’re just going up to the treehouse. We won’t be doing anything fun,” he explains, his stance awkward.

“I can go in the treehouse! Dad said I can go, right, Mom?” Sam pleads.

“But, Sam,” Castiel goes on, “we’ll be doing work and reading. And we were hoping you would work hard to learn to read good so that you can help us. We’re gonna need a lot of help with reading…stuff.”

Castiel looks at Dean, his eyes begging him for help. Dean doesn’t know what the heck he’s supposed to say to back up his friend, but then he gets an idea. “Sammy, we’re not supposed to talk about this, but uhh…Cas and I are part of a secret club, and uhhhh… it’s like, really important and really secret, and we want you to join and help us, but we need you to be able to read good first, okay?”

Dean holds his breath as Sam watches them across the table, chewing on his lip. The little boy wipes an errant tear from his cheek, and whispers, “What’s the name of the club?”

*Well, crap.* Dean’s good at thinking on his feet, but he’s not *that* good. He clears his throat a couple times to give himself a second to think, but before he can say anything, Castiel speaks up next to him.

“It’s called the Men of Letters club,” Castiel declares. “That’s why it’s so important for you to learn your letters, Sam. We do research and stuff, and you *have* to be able to read a lot for that. Because that’s the most important thing about the club.”

“Well, that and killing monsters,” Dean adds helpfully, thinking it would add some excitement to the story. Or not so helpfully, because Sammy wiggles out of his seat to cling to Mary, arms wrapped around her from behind.

“Monsters? There’s *monsters*?! he cries, hiding his face into his mother’s neck. “Mom, *Idon’t wantheretobemonsters*!”

Mary glares at her older son, turning around to return Sam’s hug and soothe him. “Ssshhh, Sammy, Dean was just kidding, there’s no monsters! Right, *Dean*?”

Dean rushes forward to grab his brother and pull him into a hug. “Yeah, Sammy, I didn’t mean it, there’s no monsters. Just…there’s mean guys that we call monsters because they’re so mean and ugly. But they’re just people, okay?”

Sam hiccups, and rubs his snotty nose onto the collar of Dean’s shirt. “Y-you mean like the Chris-Chris-tensons brothers?” he asks, hopefully.

Dean laughs and squeezes him tight. “Yeah, dude, just like the Christianson brothers. We can take care of them, right?”
Sam nods and rubs his eyes, sliding down to take his seat again at the table. He pulls open the notebook he’d been using to scribble his letters, and picks up his pencil. “I’m gonna learn to read and write good and then I can hang out with you and Cas and stop bad people, okay, Dean?” he says, looking up at his brother with hope.

Dean smiles down at him, and rubs a hand over his floppy hair. “Sure thing, pipsqueak.”

Sam dodges Dean’s hand. “Don’t call me pipsqueak,” he demands, annoyed. “I’m gonna eat all my vegetables and I’m gonna be bigger than you someday.”

Laughing, Dean turns to signal to Castiel to follow him out the door. “Whatever you say, pipsqueak!”

They climb their way up the tree and into the treehouse, Dean ahead of Castiel, turning around and reaching down to grab the books his friend is clutching. “Thanks for that, Cas,” he mutters.

“For what?” Castiel asks, confused. He crawls over to the window and pushes the glass up, closing his eyes to the breeze it lets in.

“For, y’know, helping with Sammy,” Dean answers. He sits down on the giant beanbag in the corner next to the bookshelf and opens up a battered copy of The War of the Worlds. “I kinda feel bad that I don’t hang out with him as much as before.”

“Before what?”

Dean shrugs. “Before, y’know, we moved here. I never really had any friends before now, I mean, not any that I liked hanging around a lot or anything.”

He can feel his friend staring at him, and he shifts uncomfortably, but it’s not as weird as it was before he got used to it. Now he just ignores it, or just stares back until one of them starts laughing or changes the subject.

“So, uh, you want me to read a scene out of here for you to draw, or you wanna go find something else to do?” Dean asks, changing the subject.

“Sure, I guess,” Cas replies. He pulls out his sketchbook, flipping drawings over to get to a blank page. Dean reaches over silently to pull the book from Castiel’s hands, and Castiel lets him without saying a word. It makes Dean feel fuzzy inside, knowing how much his friend trusts him, is willing to just hand over something so precious without a moment’s hesitation.

Dean flips through the sketches slowly, his eyes roaming over each drawing, even the ones he’s seen before. More often than not, there’s some aspect of flying in each picture, whether as a bird or insect as the subject, or with birds flying in the background, and “Hey, Cas, why do you draw flying stuff so much?” Dean asks.

Castiel squints as he leans over Dean’s shoulder, looking down at the drawing in his hand. “I dunno,” he says with a shrug. “I just like flying stuff. Sometimes I wish I could fly,” he adds, his voice wistful and sad. “I dream about it a lot.”

“Do you ever fall?” Dean questions.
Castiel shakes his head. “No, I never have. It’s really fun when I dream I’m flying. I don’t ever feel like I have to worry about falling.”

Dean shudders. “I hate flying. One time, we almost crashed when we were flying to Florida. It was awful.”

“Yeah, but that was on a plane. I bet you’d like it if you had wings and could fly yourself,” Castiel says, rolling his eyes.

“Oooh, could you draw me with wings? I bet that’d be badass!” Dean exclaims.

Castiel shakes his head. “I’m not very good at drawing you. Maybe some other time, okay?”

Dean tries to hide how much this hurts his feelings. Castiel seems to draw everyone else but him, and it makes him feel jealous of those other people, and wonder why his friend doesn’t want to draw him. “Sure, I guess,” he shrugs.

He starts to read the book in his hands, but he can’t seem to concentrate. The burgeoning heat of the day presses against his skin, making him groggy and cranky, so he reaches over to the bookshelf and pulls down another of Castiel’s sketchbooks, this one so full that he had to get another to continue his hobby. Some of the sketches have pulled loose from their bindings, so Dean has to be very careful as he looks through the pages.

The detail of each sketch never fails to take Dean’s breath away. Even at such a young age, Dean can recognize that his friend’s talent is exceptional. Cas is able to capture both the strength and delicacy of everything he draws, somehow showcasing the soul and very essence of each one perfectly. There are pictures of grasshoppers, frogs, turtles, fireflies and other insects that Dean has managed to catch for him. There are various drawings of the huge oak trees they climb on their adventures through the woods behind Dean’s house, as well as the creek at various water levels, depending on how much rain has fallen recently.

They’d gotten in the habit of telling stories to each other when it’s raining and there’s nothing to do, or when Castiel is spending the night at Dean’s house and they’re up way past when Mary had yelled at them for the thousandth time to go to sleep. But after the first few times they’d done storytelling, it became an unspoken agreement that Dean would tell the stories and Castiel would draw them. When Dean saw how good the pictures were, he saw it as a challenge to think up better and more outrageous stories, narrating tales of jungle safaris, mountain treks over undiscovered territories, chasing monsters and saving the world from evil. After Castiel’s first ride in the backseat of John’s Impala, he always seems to find a way to include Dean’s favorite car in the adventures, too.

Dean carefully places the sketchbook back on its shelf, and leans back against the floor. He stares up at the ceiling, listening to Castiel’s pencil ghost across the page, and it’s not long before he closes his eyes, and dozes off. He wakes what feels like only a few minutes later, but when he peeks out the window he notices the sun has moved higher in the sky, and the heat in the treehouse is starting to become oppressive.

“How long was I out for?”

Castiel glances up from his book. “About an hour, I think.”

Dean sits up, rubbing a hand across his face. “Jeez, we need to get out of here and find something
to do, or I’m gonna go crazy.”

Dean and Castiel typically have no problem finding something to keep them busy and happy in their free time, especially during the summer months. But there are those days where nothing seems to satisfy Dean’s tendency towards restlessness or the feelings of wanderlust that overcome him at the oddest moments.

And this is looking to be one of those days.

Dean is tired of traipsing through the same woods and over the same fields that they’ve seen almost every day for the past year. He shoots down every suggestion for something to do that Castiel provides, and snaps so harshly at his friend that he knows he should apologize, but he just doesn’t have the patience for it; besides, words are cheap when what would really make it up to him is finding something fun to do.

After an unappealing lunch of Kool-aid and turkey sandwiches, Dean grabs Castiel’s sleeve and drags him out the front door. “Come on,” Dean mutters. “We gotta find something to do or else I’m gonna scream.”

“We could always go back to my house and find something else to read,” Castiel says, climbing onto his bike next to Dean.

“No way,” Dean scoffs. “I’m not in the mood for Missouri to stare at me and tell me I’m doing everything wrong.”

Castiel sighs as he begins to pedal, staying close behind his friend. “She only acts that way because she likes you, you know.”

Dean snorts, looking over his shoulder. “She’s sure got a crazy way of showing it.”

He leads them both down the end of his street, taking a left as if he were heading towards Castiel’s house. But instead of taking the next right, he continues on, straight to the end of that road, and back towards the outskirts of the neighborhood. Neither one of them has ever gone this far away from their homes before, and the further they go, the less they see of any homes or other people. What were wide, sleepy streets lined with houses turn into rougher pavement with open, overgrown fields on either side of the road.

Dean spies a dirt path to his right, winding long towards a thicket of woods a few acres away from the road. He makes a sharp turn onto the dirt without thinking much beyond it being something different, finally, and he glances over his shoulder to make sure Castiel is still with him.

“Dean, where are we going?” Castiel yells out behind him.

Dean looks back at his friend and grins. “I dunno! Kinda cool, right?”

The path gets bumpy, filled with holes, and rocks, and clumps of dirt that slow the boys down. When the path turns into the woods about a half mile down the road, Dean pulls to a stop. He wipes the sweat and grime from his forehead with the hem of his shirt, turning to find Castiel doing the same.

“Whaddya think? You wanna keep going and see where it leads?” Dean asks.
Castiel squints, trying to see into the forest where the path snakes through. “I don’t know…I didn’t see any no trespassing signs on the way here,” he ventures.

Shrugging, Dean puts a foot on his bike pedal and kicks off. “I say we go for it. If anybody yells at us, we can just say we didn’t know.”

Castiel grunts in agreement beside him, and they begin their trek further into the woods. It’s barely a forest, at first, what with the sunlight beating mercilessly through the leaves. The trees and shrubs are thinned here on the outskirts, new growth not doing much in the way of shade. But the further they go, the denser the vegetation gets, and Dean breathes a sigh of pleasure when they become encased in the shadow of the tree canopy overhead. It’s quite a bit cooler here in the midst of the deepest part of the woods, the air damp with the smell of moss and dirt, but the path is harder to navigate, weeds and overgrowth blocking the way, so the boys jump off their bikes, choosing to walk them the further in they go.

A half hour later, Dean begins to notice the trees thinning above them, as rays of sunlight begin to beat through the leaves. What remains of their path curves to their left, and Dean gasps as they are suddenly thrust out of the forest and into a clearing, the sun blinding after being so long in the dark of the forest. As his eyes are adjusting to the sudden light, Dean has to rub a hand across his face, and then he almost pinches himself because he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing. There, about one hundred feet ahead of them, is a lake. A wooden pier juts out into the water, and tiny insects buzz lazily across the surface.

Dean looks back at his friend, whose eyes are wide in disbelief. There’s an old, beaten-down cabin teetering on its tiptoes in a small clearing to the right, looking as if one stiff breeze will make it come crashing down. Dean nudges Castiel, nodding towards the cabin, and they wordlessly agree to walk over and check out the building. Peeking through the window tells them that no one has been here in quite some time, dust and cobwebs having claimed possession of the interior. They quickly lose interest in the building, choosing to walk to the edge of the lake. Dean kneels down, letting his fingers run through the clear, cool water below them.

“You know what I’m thinking, Cas?”

Castiel turns his head to look at him, a slow smile creeping along his face. “It sure is hot today.”

“Yep. And you know what I like to do most when it’s this hot?”

Castiel looks back out across the water. “No. But I know what I like to do.”

Dean grins at his friend. “And what’s that?”

Castiel raises an eyebrow and side-eyes Dean. “You jump, I jump?”

The sneaky bastard doesn’t even finish his sentence before he’s off and running, and Dean whoops as he runs after him. They both reach the end of the pier and jump into the water at the same time, clothes and shoes be damned.

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That same evening, as Castiel and Dean are finishing up supper at Castiel’s house, they ask Missouri about the lake and surrounding land. They figured since she’s lived in Lawrence all her life, she’d know who owns the place and why it looks so abandoned, and they are not disappointed.

“Ah, that’s old man Joshua’s place, God rest his soul,” Missouri says, wiping down the kitchen table.

“Who was he?” Castiel asks, after Dean prompts him by kicking him under the table.

Missouri sighs. “He was a sweet, lonely old man who liked to keep to himself and his garden. He loved those flowers and trees more than he did his own self, I think.”

“Did he always keep to himself?” Dean can’t help but ask.

Missouri sits down at the table with them, shaking her head. “What I heard was that he was a preacher for a long time, but he and his family never stayed in one place for long. He and his wife and little baby girl moved here when that child could barely crawl. They lived in a house not far from your’s, Dean.”

“What happened to them?” Castiel asks.

Missouri goes quiet, a look of sadness on her face. “That poor man…their house caught fire one night, they say it was a faulty electrical outlet or some such thing. He lost his wife and his baby girl, pretty much lost his whole world. I believe he must of lost that faith of his, too, and I can’t say as I blame him. No one should have to experience that much pain, the soul just can’t hold it all in.”

Dean’s chest hurts. This story is just awful, and he wonders if they were disrespectful today by going on this man’s property and swimming in his lake, laughing and goofing off.

Missouri sits down at the table with them, shaking her head. “He gave up his profession and the church. Bought that piece of land out there, and kept to himself from then on. He only ever came into town for groceries and supplies, never stayed or talked to anybody. My momma took me out to his house one day when I was about your age,” she continues, nodding at Dean and Castiel. “She’d baked an extra pecan pie, thinking she’d take it to him, try to draw him out into social circles again. I’ll never forget that day. His garden was full of roses, all of them the most beautiful, purest white you’ve ever seen.”

“Why all white?” Castiel whispers. Dean glances at his friend, noticing that he seems as enthralled as Dean feels.

“Ah, he told my momma they were his wife’s favorite,” Missouri says, eyes sad. “Said it made him feel closer to her, like maybe she was looking down and smiling at him.”

Dean clears his throat. “So, uh, what ever happened to him?”

Missouri stands up, and walks back into the kitchen. She begins to wipe down the counter and places dishes into the sink. “He passed on and joined his wife and baby girl about ten years ago, I believe.”

Castiel goes over to help Missouri rinse the dishes, Dean not far behind. “So who owns that land now?”
“I’m not sure if anyone really knows for sure. Rumor was Joshua had a distant relative who inherited it, but we’ve not see them, if so.”

Castiel hands the dirty plates to Dean, who begins to load them into the dishwasher. “So, that land and the cabin and the lake just sit there, with nobody taking care of it?”

“Mmm hmm, pity, isn’t it? That poor man’s sadness bled so much into that land, and now all it knows is ghosts and memories.”

Dean and Castiel share a look, but they don’t say anything in response. Dean sleeps uneasily that night, thinking of the unending pain and loneliness Joshua must have endured for so long.

The next morning, he rises earlier than usual, heads downstairs, and jumps on his bike after bolting the pancakes his mom made for breakfast. Even though it’s early morning, the heat and humidity are already almost unbearable, so he pedals faster to kick up a breeze.

Castiel is awake and dressed when Dean arrives at his house, and they say their goodbyes to Missouri before rushing out the door. They already know where they’re going even without discussing it, and after a half hour of riding along, dodging insects and harsh sunlight, they find themselves back in front of the hidden lake.

“Dean, I was thinking…” Castiel pauses, chewing on his lip.

Dean notices the look of uncertainty on his friend’s face. “Yeah, Cas? What’s up?”

Castiel reaches into his backpack, pulling out a pair of work gloves. “I asked Missouri if I could borrow some of her work gloves. I…I don’t like thinking of Joshua’s garden being so neglected. I’d like to try to weed and clear off the land around the cabin and some of the lake, if I can.”

Castiel glances quickly at Dean, and looks away, eyes darting across the water. Dean shrugs, failing to keep the smile off his face. “You didn’t bring an extra pair of gloves, did you?”

He can feel Castiel watching him, and looks up to find surprise on his friend’s face. “So, you don’t mind helping me?” Castiel asks.

“Nah, it’ll be fun, I think,” Dean replies, shrugging. “Besides, it means we can swim and fish every day, too.”

Castiel grins and nods in agreement.

They spend the rest of that summer visiting Joshua’s place a few days a week. Dean helps Castiel clear away the weeds in what was obviously the garden next to the cabin, and along the shore closest to the building. In their second week there, Dean lets his curiosity get the better of him, and figures out a way into the cabin without breaking the door down. It’s his first time ever trying to pick a lock, but it comes so naturally to him it feels like he’s done it a thousand times before. Once inside, he walks through the cabin, examining everything thoroughly, which doesn’t take long considering it’s basically just three rooms – a den/kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom.

There’s no electricity or running water, of course, and some of the furniture seems to be falling apart from rust, mold, mildew, or disuse. There’s probably at least several inches of dust on everything, and Dean wouldn’t be surprised if several species of animals lived in there. But what
seems to affect Dean the most is the overwhelming feeling of loneliness through the home.

For the rest of that summer, while Castiel is weeding and clearing out the brush by hand, Dean cleans and straightens up the cabin. They’re both aware that the jig could be up at any moment, the danger of being caught out here tending to someone else’s property looming over them all the time. But the way they see it, it gives them something to do during the lazy hot summer days when they’ve tired of everything else. “And it’s not like we’re *damaging* the place,” Dean declares. “We’re adding some value to it.”

Every afternoon, after they’ve worked up a sweat and an appetite, they take a break to scarf down the sandwiches and sodas that Missouri or Mary had packed for them that morning, then race each other to the lake, jumping off the pier and cooling off in the clear water. Some days, Dean will drag along a couple of fishing poles, and after searching for crickets and worms to use as bait, he’ll prop himself at the edge of the pier, feet dangling in the cool water. Castiel will sometimes slide up next to him, grabbing a pole and reeling the line, but more often than not, he’ll just pull out his sketchbook and draw.

These hazy, golden afternoons become some of Dean’s favorite memories, staring out at the sun’s rays dancing across the water, listening to Castiel sigh next him, the whispering *scritch scritch* of his pencil across the paper a comfortable reassurance of his presence.

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In the spring of seventh grade, John approaches Dean one evening after he’s said his goodbyes to Castiel and watched his friend pedal down the driveway. As he turns to run upstairs and shower, he feels his father’s hand on his shoulder. “Hey son, hold up a minute. I was wanting to talk to you about something.”

Dean smiles up at his father. “Sure, dad. What’s up?”

John guides him over to the sofa in the living room and gestures for him to sit down. “Well, uh, I was thinking. This summer will be the last year you’ll be eligible for little league, and I thought maybe you’d be interested in giving it a try.”

Dean raises his eyebrows in surprise. “Baseball?”

John smiles and nods. “Yep. Remember how much you liked it back east?”

“Well, yeah. But, that was different.”

“How so?” John asks, frowning.

“I dunno,” Dean shrugs. “Back there, I didn’t really have much else to do. But now I’ve got Cas, and we have a lot of fun.”

The frown on John’s face deepens. “Dean, do you have any friends in your own school? I never hear you talking about anyone, and the only kid that ever comes over is Castiel.”

“Yeah, I’ve got friends there,” Dean admits, adding, “But none of them are like Cas.”
John smiles slightly and leans back in his chair. “Son, I just think maybe you should try to do more
with kids at your own school sometimes. Fit in more with them, especially since you’ll be getting
to high school soon.” He winks. “Trust me, you’ll want to fit in somewhere in your school once
you get there.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Dean agrees, chewing on his lip. “I mean, I did like playing baseball before.”

John nods his head and stands up. “So, you want me to go sign you up for it this weekend?”

Dean nods, still not quite sure what just happened or why. “Sure, I guess,” he says, unfolding
himself from the couch and walking towards the stairs.

His father slaps him on the back. “This is great, Dean. It’s gonna be fun to see you out on that
diamond again. I bet the coaches are gonna love you. Are you excited?”

“Sure,” Dean replies, walking up the stairs. “It’ll be cool.”

And it is cool, Dean must admit to himself after he sails through tryouts and lands on a team with
Victor Henrickson, a kid he knows from his English class. He really had forgotten how much he
loved playing, and had forgotten how good he is at it, too. With Dean batting lead-off and Victor as
clean-up, they become an unstoppable force, and the only thing more fun than batting is their
partnership at short stop and second. No one is better at smack talk and psychological warfare, and
between the two of them they get more outs than the rest of the team combined.

That summer before eighth grade is an adjustment for Dean and Castiel, because it’s the first time
either one of them has something to distract their attention from each other. During tryouts, Dean
begs Castiel to try out too, hoping they’ll somehow land on the same team, but Castiel refuses. He
claims it’s because he doesn’t care for or understand the competitiveness of sports, but for some
reason, Dean is convinced it’s because Castiel is afraid he won’t be any good at it since he’s never
played before. He knows that if Castiel would just try it, he’d be good at it; hell, he’d probably be
even better at it than Dean, given how the dude is able to pick up new skills and tricks so
effortlessly that it makes even Dean envious. And as much as it pisses Dean off to admit it, Castiel
could outrun him any day of the week.

Dean rags on his friend about baseball so much that one day Castiel has had enough, throwing the
rocks he’d been collecting across the creek and turning to Dean behind him, eyes dark with anger.
“Dean, why won’t you leave this alone? Why do you want me to play so bad?”

Dean can feel his face turning red, and he exhales as he looks down at his muddied shoes. “Jesus,
Cas, I don’t know, okay?! I just…if I go off and do this, what are you gonna be doing while I’m
playing?”

Castiel rolls his eyes, exasperation painted across his face. “Gee, Dean, I don’t know, whatever
will I do without you,” he replies, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

It surprises Dean how deeply that cuts into him, and he’s pissed to feel tears begin to well up in his
eyes. “Fine, Cas. Whatever. You go off and do what you want then. I’m sure you’ll find someone
else you’d rather hang out with anyways.”

He drops the bag he had slung across his shoulder, full of leaves and rocks he’d found along the
way. “Here, you can take this crap. It’s all shit for you to draw, anyways.”
Dean turns around quickly, not wanting Castiel to see the tear that’s threatening to slide down his cheek. He wipes it away as discreetly as he can, taking a few steps towards the wall of the ravine.

“Dean, wait!”

Castiel yells for him to stop, but Dean’s had enough of this. He’s not gonna beg Castiel to stay with him. Dean’s never lived in one place long enough to lose a friend like this, but he at least knows it’s not cool to keep clinging when it’s obvious the person wants to leave.

He feels a hand snake around the curve of his elbow, grasping his arm and pulling him back. “Dean, will you just stop for a second?”

“Look Cas, I get it, okay?” Dean growls. “You wanna go find other friends, that’s fine with me. I knew you’d probably find someone at your school you liked better anyways. No big deal.” He tries to brush off Castiel’s hand, but the boy’s grip is firm on his arm.

“Is that what you think this is?” Castiel asks, eyes squinting.

Dean shakes his head. “What else could it be, Cas?”

“Um, maybe just that I don’t want to play baseball.” Castiel stares at him for a moment before continuing. “Dean, I don’t make friends easily. But when I do, I hang onto them. I’m not going anywhere.”

“But we’re not gonna be able to hang out as much as we used to,” Dean complains. “Maybe I should just quit baseball.”

Castiel huffs. “Just because you’re playing baseball doesn’t mean we won’t hang out much. Besides,” he adds, “it’s not like the season is long. It’ll only be for a couple months.” Castiel releases his hold on Dean’s arm, and walks over to a fallen tree trunk, taking a seat as he pulls a couple sandwiches from his backpack. He hands a plastic-wrapped PB&J to Dean, keeping one for himself.

Dean unwraps his sandwich, the feeling of panic and dread slowly releasing its hold on his stomach. “I just, I don’t like change, is all,” he mutters. “It’s been nice staying in one place and having the same friend the past couple years.”

Castiel chews his sandwich, staring at Dean thoughtfully. “I’m not going anywhere,” he murmurs, voice low.

Dean looks up from his sandwich, and meets his friend’s gaze. “Me neither,” he replies.

It feels good to be able to say that, and for once know that he’s telling the truth.

All of Dean’s fears of Castiel drifting away because of baseball are relieved once Castiel begins attending his games and practices. Dean’s teammates tease him about it at first, calling Castiel his “fan club” and asking him if Castiel asks for his autograph and stuff. But as soon as they see Castiel’s drawings of the games, making them look way cooler than they could ever hope to be, they all stop, instead begging him for pictures of their own. Dean watches his friend fondly as he interacts with each of the players in his own unique, unaffected way, and he proudly agrees when his teammates go on and on about how awesome Castiel is.
And whenever he’s on the field, he finds himself glancing up at the bleachers, taking comfort in the steadfast presence of his friend bent over a sketchbook, drawing and patiently waiting for the game to end.

One evening about a few weeks before Thanksgiving, Sam joins Dean and Castiel in the treehouse after completing his homework. He’s become a fixture at their side lately as he’s grown older and matured a bit, seamlessly turning the duo into a trio whenever he and Jo decide they’ve had enough of each other for the day. It makes it easier that once Sam’s reading skills really started to improve he begins to turn into even more of a book geek than Castiel. Dean has found himself rolling his eyes more than once as his brother and Castiel spazz out over science and physics books. Dean prefers the pages of science fiction much more than theories and formulas, but he’s not one to tear his friend or his brother away from bonding over shared geekery.

Dean notices that Sammy seems quieter than usual, especially as he tends towards high-pitched squeaking and flailing when Cas breaks out the Stephen Hawking books. He watches as he and Castiel murmur over passages from the latest chapter they’re reading together. Sam’s not grown more than a few inches since they moved to Lawrence, a fact that is a definite sore spot with him, and one that Dean can’t resist poking more often than not. He’s wearing some of Dean’s hand-me-downs, a threadbare t-shirt and worn jeans, and he wears the cast-offs with a pride that makes Dean want to hug him, when he usually is more likely to give him a noogie.

“Dude, what’s up with you? You’re acting weird,” Dean accuses.

Both Sam and Castiel look up at Dean questioningly, and when Sam realizes he’s the one being addressed he scowls. “Nothin’.”

Dean snorts. “Yeah, somethin’s up. What, did Jo kick you in the ‘nads again? I bet if you chop off that ponytail of hers, she’d stop with the ball-bustin’.”

“No, she hasn’t done that since Ellen found out and threatened to make her go out and break off a switch,” Sam grumbles.

“So what’s got you looking like a clown pissed in your Cheerios?” Dean chuckles.

“Dean, shut up about the clowns, already!”

Castiel’s eyes dart between the both of them. “What’s the deal about clowns?”

Dean begins to laugh at the same time Sam yells, “Don’t, Dean!”

Dodging a book thrown at his head, Dean teases, “Turns out, our little Sammy here has clown fear.”

Sam groans and hides his face behind his hands. “Dude, you swore you’d never tell anybody!”

“That’s because I was trying to get you to stop crying like a baby when you crawled into my bed after your nightmare that night,” Dean laughs. “Sammy, you know I can’t keep comedy gold like
this a secret, that’s like asking me not to fart – if it doesn’t come out, eventually I’m gonna explode.”

Dean grins at Castiel, who is doing his best not to laugh along with him. Sometimes, Dean thinks Cas has way too much heart to be hanging out with the likes of him.

“Sam, I think clowns are pretty creepy, too,” Castiel says, rubbing Sam’s back.

Sam peeks between his fingers at Castiel. “You do?”

Castiel nods, his face even more serious than usual, which is saying something, for him. “In fact, I won’t ever go to Plucky Pennywhistle’s again because they freak me out too much.”

Sam removes his hands from his face and sits up straighter, side-eyeing Dean, his voice gone accusing. “Aren’t they awful? Dean made me feel like a baby for being scared of them.”

Castiel turns to Dean and smirks. “Yes, well, I think Dean likes to make others look silly because he’s embarrassed of how scared he is of dogs.”

“Hey! In case you forgot, I almost got eaten by a dog!” Dean protests, dismayed at how quickly his friend has turned against him.

Castiel rolls his eyes in exasperation. “Yeah, but it wasn’t a little Yorkie that almost attacked you, like the one you went running from last week.”

“It tried to bite me!”

“By licking your hand?”

“You don’t lick with teeth!” Dean retorts, bristling when he hears his little brother giggling. “Oh fine, laugh it up, fuzzball. But when you least expect it, you’re gonna be waking up with a Bozo the clown doll in your bed.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

Dean grins. “Try me.”

Castiel sighs, shooting Dean a dirty look. “Anyways, is there something wrong, Sam? You do seem kinda down tonight.”

Sam fidgets in his seat, staring down at his hands twisting in his lap. “I dunno, I guess. It’s just… Mom asked me what I want for Christmas, and when I told her she said no way, and that I need to think of something else, but there’s not anything else I want.”

“What did you ask for? A new pair of diapers?” Dean says, then “Ow!” when Castiel kicks him in the shin.

“No,” Sam mumbles. “I was wanting fireworks.”

Both Dean and Castiel stare at him with identical looks of confusion on their faces. “Fireworks?” Dean exclaims. “Dude, it’s frikkin’ Christmas. Nobody shoots fireworks for Christmas.”
Sam grunts. “Yeah, but this kid Brady at school said his parents let him have fireworks for Christmas last year, and he kept bragging about it, and it sounds so cool.”

Shrugging, Dean shakes his head. “Sorry man, but there’s no way you could shoot fireworks without mom and dad hearing it. Besides, if we started shooting fireworks at Christmastime, the whole neighborhood would think we were at war.”

Dean watches his little brother as he starts to mope even more. “Think of something else.”

Sam looks up at him, pouting. “Like what?”

“I dunno, but I bet Mom’s feeling guilty for shooting you down. Hey, maybe you can use that to your advantage. Ask her for a puppy,” Dean suggests, watching Sam’s eyes light up.

“But what about your dog fear, Dean?” Castiel mocks.

Dean throws a shoe at him. “Maybe this is how I get over it. If I’m around a dog when it’s a defenseless little puppy, then it won’t be so scary when it’s grown up.”

“You really think she’d let me have a dog?” Sam wonders.

“Sure, buddy, milk that guilt for all it’s worth!”

Castiel snorts, meeting Dean’s grin with a smile of his own. “I’m sure your mother would be so pleased at your sneakiness,” he says.

“Hey, it takes all kinds of tricks to make it in the suburbs these days,” Dean explains, pleased with himself for cheering his brother up, dog fear or not.

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One night a month later, as soon as the clock strikes midnight, Dean slips on his shoes and jacket. He sneaks as stealthily as he can out of his room and towards Sam’s, doing his best to step over the spots on the floor that he knows from experience will creak and signal his presence. Every few steps he stops, listening for any sound of his parents still being awake, but he hears nothing aside from the house settling and the clock downstairs ticking.

He scrunches his face as he slowly pushes Sam’s bedroom door open, cursing himself as the door creaks for not thinking to grease the hinges beforehand. He tiptoes in as best he can in sneakers, and leans over his brother, sound asleep in his bed. The adorable little shit has the covers pulled up to his ears, and he’s snoring softly. Dean grins to himself in anticipation of scaring the crap out of him, but also at the thought of the look on Sam’s face when he sees what he has planned.

Dean slides a hand over his brother’s mouth and squeezes his nostrils shut, cutting off his air supply. It takes a couple seconds, but Sam’s eyelids suddenly pop open, a look of terror in his eyes. He squirms, but Dean holds him down firmly, raising a finger to his mouth and whispering, “Sssshhhh. Don’t wanna wake Mom and Dad.”

Sam’s eyebrows scrunch together, and he stares up at his brother like he’s finally lost his mind. “Dean, what the heck is going on?”
“It’s a surprise, Sammy,” Dean whispers. “Now get out of bed and get some clothes on. We’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Dean, I don’t know if I want to be going anywhere with you if you’ve finally gone mental,” Sam mutters, but throws the covers back and climbs out of bed anyways.

“Just shut up and hurry up, okay? We ain’t got all night.”

Dean hands his brother some pants and a sweatshirt that are draped across his desk chair, doing his damnedest to keep from bouncing in place.

They carefully make their way down the stairs and outside, Dean patting his pockets to make sure he remembered his house key. It would suck if they successfully snuck out, only to come back and realize they couldn’t get back inside. Dean guides Sam over to the side of the house, motioning for him to climb onto his bike and follow him. Sam is still looking at Dean like he can’t decide if he should be scared for his life or not, but at least the kid goes along with him without too much fuss.

They ride their bikes along the silent streets, the darkness and the chill creeping around the edges of the sidewalks and beyond, in that way it always seems to do this late at night. Dean shivers against the moist night air, the breeze hitting his face as he cycles and making his eyes water. He slows down a bit so that it’s easier for Sam to keep up, feeling a surge of protectiveness.

The streets begin to narrow the further they go until they reach gravel, yet Dean continues on, Sam following ever closer behind. Gravel becomes dirt, and the glow of city lights recede as the moon and the stars become prominent. Dean doesn’t hesitate on his path, even though he’s only traveled this road in daylight. One of the perks of never staying in one place for long is knowing how to not get lost, and Dean’s navigational abilities have only improved as he’s gotten older.

Before long, they reach their destination, and Dean skids to a stop in front of the open, deserted field. But Dean knows it’s not as deserted as it first seems, and he’s unsurprised to see a shadow of movement coming from behind one of the large stacks of hay bales.

“Dean…” Sam begins, his voice hushed and alarmed.

“It’s okay, Sammy,” Dean says. “It’s just Cas.”

Castiel walks up to them, hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket. “I was starting to worry you got lost in the dark.”

Dean huffs, his breath forming a cloud between them in the chill evening air. “Dude, you should know me well enough by now to know I don’t get lost.”

“Whatsoever,” Castiel sighs. “Can we get started now? If Missouri finds me gone she’ll have my hide.”

“Guys, what the heck is going on? Where are we, and what are we doing here?” Sam moves to stand in front of them, and Dean can see he’s shivering in the cold. He probably should have made him put on an extra layer, but he was just too nervous about getting them out of the house to think about it.

Dean smiles down at his little brother. “You’re about to find out.” He looks to Castiel. “Is it set up already?”
Castiel nods. “Yep, I’ll go ahead and get it started.”

Dean turns to Sam. “You gotta close your eyes for this part.”

A look of disbelief crosses Sam’s face. “Dude, you expect me to close my eyes when you dragged me out here in the dead of night, in the middle of nowhere, and won’t even tell me what’s going on? You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, and you’re a doofus. Now shut up, and close your eyes,” Dean chides.

Sam stares at him for a second, shaking his head and rolling his eyes before finally closing them. Dean grabs onto the sleeve of his jacket, pulling him a few steps forward gently so as to keep him from stumbling over the clumps of dead grass. He keeps one eye on Sam to make sure he keeps his eyes closed, and the other eye on Cas, watching as his friend struggles with his task in the middle of the field.

“You need help?” Dean yells out to Castiel, impatient.

“Nope, I’ve got it under control,” Castiel calls back, his voice crisp in the silence.

Suddenly, Castiel straightens up, stepping backwards quickly before turning around and striding towards them. Dean can see the fire catching, sparks flying and sizzling, and he leans down to whisper in his little brother’s ear. “Merry Christmas, Sammy.”

There’s a sudden, deafening pop, followed by an explosion of colors in the night sky. Dean can feel his brother jump beside him, startled from the noise and sudden brightness. He looks down to see Sam’s eyes wide in wonder, the lights from the fireworks reflected in the glassiness of his pupils. There’s another explosion as Castiel lights a Roman candle, the sky above them suddenly so bright that they have to squint to watch. Finally, Castiel ignites one of the big finale kits, which sets off an explosion of all kinds of different fireworks, one after another. Sparks and fireballs are launched across the sky, as Castiel steps slowly backwards to stand next to Dean and Sam.

He lights a couple of sparklers as the explosions above them die down, handing one to Sam and the other to Dean. Sam laughs, eagerly taking it and jogging through the smoke from the firecrackers, watching the tracers from the sparks behind him. Cas lights another sparkler, and he and Dean use them as swords in a duel, sparks flashing and sizzling between them. Dean catches a glimpse of Castiel’s face between flashes of the sparklers, and notices that his friend looks sad.

“You okay, Cas?”

Castiel shoots him a quick smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. “Yes. I just…the fireworks kind of looked like shooting stars, and that reminded me of what Anna always said about shooting stars.”

Dean waits to see if Castiel will continue, but when he doesn’t he urges, “What did she say?”

Castiel stares back up at the night sky. “She says shooting stars are angels falling from grace.” He glances back at Dean before shrugging. “I know it's stupid. I just didn’t like feeling like the angels were falling because of me.”

Dean stares at his friend for several beats, not sure of what to say. Finally, he decides to just lighten the mood. “Dude, you shot off some fireworks, don’t go getting all dark and emo on me,” he jokes,
knocking an elbow against Castiel’s side.

Castiel smiles and nods, but stays silent. They watch as Sam finishes off his sparkler, laughing as a spark catches his finger and stings.

“You know, I bet Sam never forgets this,” Cas says, keeping his voice low so Sam doesn’t hear him. “This was a great idea you had.”

Dean looks over at his little brother, grinning as the kid stumbles over a rock. “Yeah, well, it couldn’t have happened if you hadn’t thought to come out to Joshua’s cabin. This was the perfect place for it.”

Castiel snorts as Sam begins to jog back over to them. “I’m just glad it rained all day today, so we don’t have to worry about catching all this on fire.”

Dean lights three more sparklers for them, and they begin to have a swordfight between the three of them, laughing and screaming whenever one gets too close and burns the other. Once the last embers of their sparklers have died out, they stand around for a few seconds, staring at the low clouds of smoke left over from the display. All three of them are breathing heavily, trying to catch their breath after laughing so hard.

Dean turns to see the look on Sam’s face, and suddenly finds his arms full of little brother, Sammy having grabbed onto him and wrapped his arms around his waist, holding tight like the mini-octopus that he is.

“Thanks, Dean,” Sam says, his voice muffled in the fabric of Dean’s sweatshirt. “Mom and Dad wouldn’t have ever let me do this. This is the best Christmas ever.”

Dean looks down at the top of Sam’s head, and feels his eyes go misty. He’d blame it on the smoke, but when he catches Castiel staring at him and smiling, he knows there’s no way anyone would believe him.

He wraps his arms around Sammy’s shoulders, pulling him closer and squeezing him tight.

“Anytime, pipsqueak. Anytime.”

The summer before their freshman year of high school flies by in a frenzy of baseball and preparation for the coming school year. Dean and Castiel do their best to ignore it all and pretend that nothing’s changing. As exciting as the thought of growing up is, Dean can’t help but feel uneasy that things might change too much, especially in regards to his friendship with Castiel.

One afternoon the week before school starts, Castiel has to attend orientation at his school, leaving Dean alone for the day. Mary urges him to accompany her and Sam to visit a family that just moved into the neighborhood, and since he’s bored he agrees to go along. The family includes a teenage girl about a year older than Dean, named Casey, and she instantly makes Dean flustered, something that he’s never had a problem with before when it came to girls, not that he’s had much experience.

Casey leads Dean downstairs into their basement, which her parents had turned into a rec room with a pool table and dart board. She grabs a pool stick and motions for him to grab one for
himself, and they play in silence for a couple minutes. He can feel his mouth go dry, watching her slink around the table, curves tight in a red tank top and shorts. He’s never hung out with a girl like her before, and he’s afraid it shows. She just seems so much more than a year older than him, and he’s almost grateful that he’s so out of his league here that there’s no point in even trying to flirt.

“So, uh, Dean, what kind of action do they have around here?” Casey asks, balls clacking against the edge of the table as she makes her shot.

Dean shifts nervously, watching as she leans over the table again. “Um, what do you mean?”

Casey stands up. “You know…where does everybody hang out? What kind of parties, where’s the stores that don’t card, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, uh…I don’t really know, I guess,” Dean mutters, staring down at his shoes. “I don’t really hang out with a lot of different people or go to a lot of places.”

He knows he sounds like the biggest dork, and his fears are confirmed when Casey walks up to him and smirks. “Why, you’re just a baby, aren’t you?” she murmurs, leaning over to whisper in his ear. “So sweet and so young, I bet you’ve never even made out with a girl yet, have you?”

Dean clears his throat and leans back. “Sure I have,” he replies, doing his damnedest to sound cocky.

Casey smiles slowly, her glance knowing. “Maybe I’ll have to test you on that some day. But not today,” she adds, dropping her pool cue and turning to walk up the stairs. “Because today I have places to be.”

Dean sighs in relief before following her up the stairs. He really did not want her to find out just how miserably he’d fail her test.

Later that afternoon finds Dean hanging out with Castiel in the treehouse, Castiel having returned from his school orientation and complaining about the kids he saw there.

“Aren’t they the same kids you were in junior high with?” Dean chuckles.

Castiel grunts, lying down on the sleeping bag they’d left pulled out from the night before. “Yes, and that’s the problem. I didn’t like them before, and I don’t like them now.”

Snorting, Dean lies down next to him. “Yeah, I bet I wouldn’t like those stuck up rich kids, either. But if it makes you feel any better, my school probably won’t be much better. Full of all these different cliques, and every one of them sucks.”

Castiel hums in agreement as they both stare up through the skylight at the fading light of the sky. There’s a slight breeze wafting in through the open window providing more comfort than is to be expected at this time of year, but it’s still too hot to be completely comfortable. Dean finds himself lulled into dozing off, listening to the wind in the leaves and the drone of a lawnmower a few houses down.

“So, what did you do today while I was gone?” Castiel asks, rousing Dean from his sleep.

Dean shifts, turning to lay on his side, and props his head up on his hand to look down at his friend. “My mom made me go with her to the new neighbor’s down the road. It was lame.”
Castiel opens his eyes and turns his head to look at Dean. “Oh? Do they have any kids?”

Dean groans. “Just one. A daughter. She’s about fifteen, I think.”

“Why do you say it like that?” Castiel prods. “What was she like?”

Dean gives a slight shrug and rolls his eyes. “I dunno. She seemed kinda like a jerk. But she was hot. And, uh… never mind.”

Castiel stares at him, brows knitted in confusion. “What were you going to say?”

Dean lets loose an exasperated sigh. “I don’t know, man. She was just…she seemed really…experienced. If you know what I mean.”

“Okay…” Castiel replies after a moment of hesitation.

Dean stares at his friend for a few moments, debating whether or not to say what’s bugging him, but in the end he can’t not share it with him. They tell each other everything, so it’d be weird to stop now.

“She said something that got me thinking,” he hedges. He chews on his lip, keeping his eyes focused on a thread on the sleeping bag that he’s busy pulling loose.

“…And are you planning on telling me what it was sometime in this century?” Castiel jokes.

Dean shoots him a glare. “Yeah, smart ass. She just…she said she bets I haven’t even made out with a girl yet.”

He tries to look at everything else in the treehouse but Castiel, feeling his face flush with embarrassment.

“Well, have you ever made out with a girl?” Castiel asks.

“No,” Dean mutters.

Castiel continues to stare at him. “Then what’s the big deal?”

Dean looks at his friend in disbelief. “‘What’s the big deal?’ Uh, the big deal is I’m about to be in high school, and I’ve never even made out with a girl yet, and everybody can tell.”

“I highly doubt everybody can tell, Dean,” Castiel replies. “Besides, who cares? I’ve never made out with anybody, either.”

“Yeah, but you never care what people think. I do,” Dean grumbles.

Castiel stares at him so quietly that it makes Dean fidgety and nervous. “Why do you care what others think?” he offers after a minute.

“I dunno…because it feels like I’m supposed to, I guess,” Dean replies, uncertainly. “Because if we don’t fit in, then we stick out, and sticking out gets you noticed, which in my experience, isn’t ever good.”
Castiel turns his head, staring through the skylight again. “You once told me that the only way to get anywhere is by breaking the rules, and making things up as you go. Maybe this is kinda the same thing. Maybe you just need new experiences, then.”

Dean huffs in response, but doesn’t say anything. He leans back and closes his eyes again, but instead of falling back to sleep his mind starts twisting in circles. He’ll never be any good at making out with a girl unless he gets practice, but he can’t get practice without making out with a girl. And if he sucks at it, he doesn’t want some chick going and blabbing about it to all her friends, because starting high school as the dude who kisses like a fish is not high on his list of awesome things.

But if he had someone to practice with that he trusted, then he wouldn’t have to worry. The only girl he knows that he could ask would be Jo, and she’s way too young to kiss. Plus, she’d probably bust his kneecaps for even asking. And really, the only person he’d ever trust enough not to laugh at him would be Cas, but he’s most definitely not a girl.

Then again, if it’s just for practice and not for reals, who says it has to be a girl?

Dean’s stomach flutters, his face flushing even hotter at the thought of kissing his friend. It doesn’t gross him out to consider kissing a guy, not like he thought it would. But that’s probably just because it’s Castiel he’s thinking about kissing, and not some random stranger. Castiel is like family to him, the best friend he’s ever had, and he’s never been this comfortable around anyone before. He’s not afraid to share anything with Cas, and the closeness that they feel with each other apparently extends to not having a problem with the thought of kissing him.

“What if…” Dean begins, but he stops himself because he’s not quite sure how to broach the subject.

“What?” Castiel asks, and Dean can see out of the corner of his eye that his friend is watching him.

He clears his throat, and tries again. “Well, if neither one of us has made out with a girl, but we want some experience with it before doing it for real…what if we tried it with each other?”

The sudden silence in the treehouse is overwhelming; it seems like even the birds have stopped singing, and that lawnmower down the road has chosen this moment to die on its owner, leaving a void of noise that is stifling. Dean feels like all the oxygen has been sucked out of the room just when he needs it most, and his skin goes clammy all over. He opens his mouth to say just forget he ever said anything when Castiel answers. “I guess we could.”

Dean glances quickly at his friend, eyes wide. “You don’t think I’m weird for saying that?”

Castiel squints at him, confusion written across his face. “Why would I think you’re weird?”

Dean really shouldn’t be surprised that Castiel doesn’t see the weirdness of this situation – he has never been one to be aware of or even care about societal norms. Even so, he finds himself giving his friend an out. “I don’t know…because we’re not gay, and we’re just friends, and friends don’t make out with each other, you know?”

Castiel looks away, staring again at the ceiling above him. “Who cares if friends don’t normally do that? Maybe we’re different. Besides, it’s not like it’d mean we’re dating. It’d just be practicing. I don’t see why it should be considered any weirder than anything else we do together, especially if
it’s only this one time.”

And that attitude is so like Castiel that Dean can’t help but smile to himself. He wishes he can be so unaffected by what others think of him, but years of moving around and trying to blend in as best he could has left a need to fit in and be a part of the crowd that he can’t quite shake.

“Okay, well, if we do this, we have to promise not to tell anybody else about it,” he decides. “In fact, maybe we should promise not to ever even talk about it.”

Castiel stares at Dean, frowning. “Sure, if that’s what you want.”

“I mean, that way, we can keep it from being weird between us. Just pretend it never happened,” Dean continues.

Castiel nods slowly, his eyes widening comically when Dean scoots closer to him. “Wait, are you wanting to do this right now?”

Shrugging, Dean smiles hesitantly. “Sure. Why not?”

He watches as Castiel turns himself, so that he’s lying on his side, facing Dean, and there’s a second where his nose wrinkles up, and you’re sniffing my breath races through Dean’s mind. A nervous laugh bubbles up out of him, fading away as Castiel gazes intently at him. Dean stares back at his friend for several beats, wondering if he should be the one to initiate the kiss since it was his idea, but before he can kick himself to do it, Castiel leans in, placing a dry kiss on his lips.

Dean breathes in sharply, surprised at first. They both keep their eyes open, staring at each other with uncertainty, and just lie there with their mouths touching. It’s…an odd feeling, to say the least. Dean cautiously puckers his lips, returning Castiel’s kiss, and watches his friend’s eyes widen at the sensation. He turns his head a fraction to the right, slotting their lips together a bit better. Castiel parts his lips to the movement, and every nerve ending in Dean’s body zings when he feels the tip of Castiel’s tongue peek out of his mouth, tasting Dean’s bottom lip.

Dean parts his own lips, daring to lick across Castiel’s upper lip, and watches, rapt, as Castiel’s eyes flutter closed. The first touch of their tongues is the most incredible thing Dean has ever felt. It’s slick and wet, and messy and clumsy, and most likely the best thing ever. Each swipe of their tongues feels as though Castiel is climbing inside of him, and Dean licks further into his friend’s mouth because he wants inside of Castiel, too.

They both pull away at the same time, breathing heavily as they stare at each other, eyes wide and dark. Dean sees something in Castiel’s eyes that he’s never seen before, and he wonders if Castiel is seeing the same thing in his own. Castiel reaches out to him, grabbing onto his shoulder and pulling him closer as he leans in to kiss Dean again, and Dean can feel himself smiling against his friend’s mouth, laughing as he feels Castiel’s mouth open up to him again, tasting the cotton candy that Cas had been eating just a few minutes before, the sweetness making him ache.

Dean’s surprised when he realizes he has a hand fisted in the fabric of Castiel’s shirt, wrapping around his back and pulling him closer. He’s never known his body to do things without his awareness before, but everything about this moment has become so instinctual. It feels right to be pressed up against Castiel, right to be kissing him. In all the times he’s thought about kissing girls, he always knew it’d feel great. But he never knew it could feel like this.

“Hey, Dean! Mom said supper is almost ready!”
Both boys pull apart as if they’d been struck by lightning, and Dean pushes Castiel away, reaching down to straighten his shirt when he hears Sam start climbing the ladder. He notices Castiel wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and does the same, hoping to God they don’t look as guilty as he so obviously feels.

Thankfully, his little brother is not the most observant of kids, especially when he sees Castiel. “Cas, I didn’t know you were here! Will you stay and show me some more constellations after supper? Dean won’t show me anymore.”

Dean chuckles and sits up, turning away so that Sam and Castiel can’t see how much he’s blushing. “I said I wouldn’t show you anymore because you kept correcting my pronunciation.”

“Hey, it’s not my fault you can’t pronounce Pleiades,” Sam snorts.

“Bite me, jerk,” Dean mutters. He dares a glance at Castiel over his shoulder, catching his friend staring at the interaction between him and Sammy with amusement in his eyes.

“Yes, Sam, I’ll stay and look through the telescope with you,” Castiel replies.

Sammy bounces in place for a second before climbing back down on the ladder. “Cool! I’ll go tell mom you’re staying for supper!”

Dean tenses in the silence after Sam leaves, and begins to wonder if maybe they made a huge mistake. What just happened between them…it’s big. He doesn’t really understand what it was or what it means, but it sure as hell didn’t go down the way he’d expected. He thought it’d be weird and awkward, something they’d be embarrassed of and laugh about later. But what he felt…it isn’t something he thinks he could ever laugh about.

He jumps when Castiel stands up, surprised by the sudden movement. Castiel eyes him warily, and Dean can feel his face turning red again. “So, uh, how’d I do?” Dean asks, trying his best to sound cocky and nonchalant.

Castiel narrows his eyes, staring at Dean and chewing on his lip. *That same lip I was just sucking on,* Dean thinks possessively, distracted by the thought. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Castiel answers with a faint smile. “What about me?”

Dean can’t help the sheepish grin on his face, as much as he tries to hold it back. “I think you’re good, man,” he replies, remembering the slide of Castiel’s tongue against his own.

They both remain still for several moments, Dean not sure of what to do next. They should probably head down for supper, but a part of him doesn’t want to leave the treehouse, because then the spell will be broken, and this will have never happened. It’s stupid to think that way, because before he had no problem with acting like this hadn’t happened, but now that it *has,* he kind of wants to cling to it for as long as he can.

“Dean, are we okay?” Castiel asks, and Dean meets his eyes to find a worried look on his face.

Dean shoots his friend a smile and nods, hoping he seems more confident than he feels. “Yeah, Cas. We’re good. Forgetting it ever happened, right?”

Dean isn’t sure why he holds his breath, waiting for his friend’s response, or why, when Castiel
nods in agreement and says, “Yep, nothing ever happened,” his stomach twists and his chest hurts.

By the time they climb down the ladder from the treehouse and reach the ground, he’s managing to force a smile on his face when Castiel glances back at him, and he shoves all thoughts of what they did to the deepest corners of his mind.
Chapter 6

Let’s go for a drive
And see the town tonight
There’s nothing to do, but I don’t mind
When I’m with you

~Arcade Fire, “Suburban War”

Seventeen years old

Dean rushes out of Charlie’s RPG club, pushing past the stragglers hanging out in the hallway after school. He jogs up the stairs and past the cafeteria, and by the time he makes it to the gym, he’s out of breath and sweaty. His eyes dart around the weight room until they find their target. Castiel is on the other side of the room, laid out underneath the bench press, Victor standing nearby and spotting him.

“Winchester, you didn’t tell me you had a friend that could bench press a fucking schoolbus!” Victor exclaims as Dean walks up to them.

Dean huffs, making eye contact with Castiel. “Yeah, well, I didn’t know it either, but Cas is full of surprises, lately.” It’s a dig, and he knows it, but Dean can’t help the sense of satisfaction he feels at the guilty look on Castiel’s face.

“Yeah, I hope he can swing a bat and catch a ball too, cuz we need somebody like him on the team,” Victor jokes.

“I guess we’ll just have to test him and see,” Dean answers, holding Castiel’s stare.

Victor pulls on his jacket and grabs his duffel bag. “You chumps need a ride home? Coach is letting us out early for the day.”

Dean looks to Castiel, who nods. “Sure, man. Just drop us off at my place, I can take Cas home later.”

As soon as Victor has dropped them off at Dean’s house, and before they’ve even stepped inside, Castiel turns on Dean. “Okay, let me have it.”

Dean opens the door and pushes his way into the house, looking back at Castiel in confusion. “Let you have what?”

“I know you’re angry with me for not telling you about trying out for the baseball team,” Castiel replies. “But it’s not like you own the team, Dean. I can try out if I want.”

Dean is so taken aback by this, he’s not sure how to respond at first. He stands there, watching Castiel pull off his jacket and hang it up, and by the time Castiel turns back around and shoots him a sullen look, it hits Dean what his friend is actually saying. “You think I’m pissed because I don’t want you trying out for the team?”
Castiel looks at Dean as if he’s an idiot. “Why else would you be pissed?”

“Um, maybe because you’re keeping secrets from me?” Dean fires back, and it seems he can’t stop the tumble of words that follows. “Maybe because you never ask my opinion on anything anymore? Maybe because, oh I don’t know, even though we’re best friends and we talked for years about how awesome it’d be if we went to the same school, now that we do you keep away from me like I’m a leper with the clap?”

They have a stare down for several moments, but finally Castiel is the one to cave, huffing out a breath and rolling his eyes. “I just…I didn’t want you to feel crowded, Dean. And I wasn’t even sure I was going to try out for baseball until I walked into the gym this afternoon.”

Dean hangs up his jacket and kicks off his shoes, and maybe he’s relieved Cas seems to be avoiding the hurt he knows colored his accusation; so relieved, he’ll detour around it himself. “So, why are you trying out? I thought you hated baseball.”

Castiel climbs the stairs ahead of him, leading them into Dean’s room and collapsing onto the futon. “I don’t hate baseball, I just never really had a desire to play team sports.”

“Until now?” Dean prompts him, climbing onto his bed and leaning back against the headboard.

Shrugging, Castiel props his legs up along the futon. “Athletics look good on college applications. And I got kind of burnt out on track at Host Academy. I figured maybe a more team-focused sport would be interesting.”

“You coulda tried out for soccer. Shit knows you’re fast enough for it,” Dean jokes.

“Soccer doesn’t have you,” Castiel replies, his eyes widening as he looks away quickly, almost as if he didn’t mean to say it out loud.

Dean’s not sure how to respond to that, so he doesn’t say anything for a few seconds, until he finally decides to just ignore it. “You’re gonna need batting practice. A lot of batting practice.”

He watches as Castiel stares down at his hands in his lap. “Maybe baseball wasn’t the best idea I’ve ever had,” he mutters.

“Nah,” Dean says. “It’s a great idea. I bet you’ll be the best base runner on the team before the season is out. And hey, you’ll have me as a trainer, so there’s no way you won’t make try outs.”

Castiel glances warily at Dean. “Really? You don’t mind helping me?”

Dean grins. “Are you kidding me? The chance to boss you around and know more about something than you do? I’ve been waiting my whole life for this moment.”

Laughing in a way he hopes doesn’t sound forced, he bends over to dodge a shoe that Castiel throws at his head. “Looks like we’re gonna have to work on your throwing arm, too, Shoeless Joe.”

“I don’t understand that reference,” Castiel says, confused.

Dean snorts. “Which is why we’re gonna add baseball history to your lesson plan, too.”
Dean never would have thought that baseball would be the thing that renews the closeness of his friendship with Castiel, but the following months prove him wrong.

They spend the next few weeks in each others’ pockets, working out in the gym and practicing with teammates every day after school. Castiel sails through tryouts and makes the team easily, Coach Taft almost drooling all over himself when he gets a look at Castiel running the bases. Dean had a feeling that’d be his friend’s specialty, but he’d had no idea just how fast and sneaky Castiel could be. He picks up on the psychological part of running bases almost as if he was born to intimidate and psych people out, and Dean can’t hardly wait to see what Cas will be like in a real game.

Deciding Castiel’s position on defense took a little longer, and Coach still seems like he’s not sure what to do with him. He’ll most likely be put in the outfield, especially since there’s an opening out there now that Dean has moved up to second base. Dean likes the thought of Castiel being in center field, backing him up with his steady and unflinching presence, but he’d be just as happy to have him at short stop too, where they could team up and rock the fuck out of the infield.

Dean is feeling the happiest he’s felt in months, getting to hang out so much with his best friend again. It feels almost like old times, but even better because now he’s not living two separate lives. He’s got Castiel by his side even in school, and Dean’s beginning to remember what it was like to not give a fuck what other people think of him. He’s not felt the urge to go off with his stoner friends, hiding away and forgetting about the world for quite a while, and with Castiel rushing to study after practice every day, Dean’s taken up studying as well, and consequently, his grades have never been better.

Winter finally begins to give way to spring, as the temperatures turn warmer and everything starts to slowly thaw out. As the days get longer, Dean and Castiel stay later at school for practice, each of them taking advantage of the warmer temperatures by wearing less layers; long sleeves, flannels, and jeans giving way to t-shirts and shorts.

One late afternoon, Dean takes Castiel to the batting cages at a park up the street from school to get some extra swings in. He’s noticed in practice recently that Castiel seems to be having some difficulty at the plate, but he’s not had a chance to really study his friend to figure out what’s wrong. Coach has been too busy to do more than yell at Castiel to get his shit together soon or he’ll be knocked off the starting lineup, and Dean thinks Castiel has worked too hard in such a short period of time to let that happen.

They get the pitching machine started up, and Dean steps away, sitting down on a bench behind the cage so he can keep a close eye on Castiel’s form and stance. It only takes about twelve pitches or so for Dean to figure out what Castiel’s problem is.

“Dude, loosen up a bit,” Dean calls out. “You’re too tense, and it’s slowing your swing down.”

Castiel grunts inside the cage, acknowledging Dean’s comment, but keeps swinging as the pitching machine continues to lob balls at him. Dean leans back on the bench, and pulls out a bag of sunflower seeds from Castiel’s duffel on the ground next to him. He’d teased Cas mercilessly about copying Coach Taft’s habit, but more often than not Dean’s been the one draining Castiel’s supply of seeds. He pops a seed in his mouth, cracking open the shell with his teeth and spitting it onto the ground as he watches Castiel continue to hit fouls and ground balls.
“Cas, buddy, you gotta pull that elbow in and unlock your hips,” Dean reiterates. “You’re losing all your power by being so stiff.”

Scoffing, Castiel steps back and away from the plate, turning around to glare at Dean. “How am I supposed to loosen up when I’ve got balls flying at my face at eighty miles an hour?”

Dean bites his lip to keep from laughing. “Did you seriously just say you’ve got balls flying at your face?”

Castiel rolls his eyes. “Are you seriously saying that when you’ve got my seeds in your mouth?”

Dean sucks in a shocked breath, lodging a sunflower seed in his throat. He starts laughing at the same time he’s coughing and gagging, desperately trying to get air into his lungs. His eyes start watering and he has to hang his head between his knees to regain some composure, but after a minute or so, he sits up and finds Castiel staring at him, fingers curled through the webwork of the metal fence, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“You did that on purpose,” Dean accuses.

Castiel shrugs. “Maybe.” He glances over his shoulder at the pitching machine. “Looks like it’s out of balls.”

Sighing, Dean jumps up. “I’ve got more tokens. Maybe I can get in there and you can watch my stance for a few pitches, see what you’re doing wrong.”

They trade places, and Dean bats through the next set, with Castiel watching from the bench. After the first several pitches, Dean gets in his zone the way he always does, enjoying the fluidity of motion and the feel through his fingers as the bat hits the ball. He forgets where he is and who he is for a few minutes, and when the machine stops pitching, he closes his eyes for a second, reveling in the burn of his muscles.

When Castiel clears his throat behind him, Dean turns around. “That was beautiful to watch, Dean,” Castiel says.

Dean dips his head, feeling a flush creep up the back of his neck. “What?”

“Just the way you swing, it seems so natural and effortless. And the precision and strength of your swing is mesmerizing,” Castiel continues. “You love it, don’t you?”

Shrugging, Dean shoves a hand in his pocket to pull out more tokens. “I like it when it’s just me getting to swing at pitches. I can focus on that and how it feels, and everything else kinda melts away. It feels…pure, I guess.”

They stare at each other through the fence for several seconds until Dean clears his throat. “So, uh, why don’t you get back in here and give it another try? We’ll see if you learned anything watching me.”

After a handful of swings, it’s obvious Castiel still isn’t loosening up, and “Cas, you’re still locking your hips,” Dean tells him. “You can’t pivot good if you’re doing that.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying to me, Dean. It doesn’t feel like I’m locking anything,” Castiel snaps over his shoulder.
Dean sighs. “Okay, fine, here,” he says, stepping up behind his friend. He slides his body up against Castiel, his chest to Castiel’s back, and wraps his arms around him. He hears Castiel suck in a breath, and feels his body go still against him.

“Dean, what are you doing?” Castiel whispers, and he turns his head, looking at Dean from the corner of his eye.

Dean hooks his chin over Castiel’s shoulder and places his palms on top of Castiel’s hands where they’re gripping the neck of the bat. “I’m showing you the right way to swing a bat,” Dean murmurs against Castiel’s ear. And yeah, he’s being entirely too flirty and hands-on for this to be a training session with a guy, and one who's his best friend to boot, but he can’t help trying to tease that smart-ass look off Castiel’s face.

But what Dean hadn’t predicted was how being this close to his friend would make him feel. His stomach does a sudden little flip flop, and in the same instant his heart starts up a pounding that feels like a drum corps is marching in his chest. He tries to ignore it, but what he can’t ignore is how Castiel feels against him. His back is lean and hard, and Dean can feel muscles flexing against his chest, rubbing his nipples through his flimsy t-shirt. Dean’s cheek is sliding against Castiel’s neck, the hairs along his nape damp from sweat.

Dean takes a deep, shaky breath, trying to get his bearings, but the smell of Castiel, his sweat and shampoo and musk, all take him back to hot, endless summer days of their youth. It’s the scent of happiness, exploring the world together, riding their bikes side-by-side through winding tree-covered streets, afternoons spent fishing and swimming and laughing so hard Dean thought he’d surely puke, evenings spent telling stories and drawing and lying close to each other as they stared up at the stars through the leaves surrounding their treehouse.

It’s the scent of home. And Dean hadn’t realized just how much he’s missed it and needed it until now.

He clears his throat, trying to hide his revelation by shifting his arms, pulling Castiel’s right arm down and in. “See, you need to pull your elbow in like this, and loosen your shoulders a bit.” He gives Castiel a moment to settle his shoulders into a position that feels comfortable. “Doesn’t that feel better already?”

Castiel gives a tiny nod. “I suppose.”

“Okay, now bend your knees some more, and turn your left hip back a bit. That should loosen your stance enough for you to have better control of your pivot when you swing.”

Castiel rolls his hip back, pushing himself further against Dean, and it takes every ounce of strength Dean has not to moan when he feels Castiel’s ass rub against his crotch. He tries to think of something, anything to keep himself from sporting a woody against his best friend’s ass, but what he usually thinks of when he’s trying to prevent an erection is baseball stats, and from this moment on he’s pretty sure anything baseball-related will be instant boner material, instead.

“Does this feel right, Dean?” Castiel asks.

Dean is at a complete loss for how to answer that question until Castiel elaborates. “Is my stance okay, or should I open my hips up wider?”
Castiel peeks back over his shoulder at Dean, face so close that Dean’s nose rubs against his cheek. The proximity of Castiel’s mouth to his own is intoxicating, and Dean feels like he’s standing on the roof of a skyscraper with one foot hanging over the edge. He shoots Castiel a quick smile, hoping he can’t read his mind, because it is a clusterfuck of confusion and thoughts of cuddling and possibly dry-humping his friend right out of this batting cage.

“Um, no. I mean, yes! No, you shouldn’t open them wider. That is wide enough for me - I mean, you’ll be getting to third base in no time. On the field. Third base on the field,” Dean clarifies, pulling back and away from Castiel, and possibly slinking off to Mexico to hide from his embarrassment.

Castiel, thank god, seems more confused than bothered by Dean’s sudden attack of *whateverthefuckthisis*. “Where else would I be reaching third base?”

“Exactly, right?” Dean takes a moment to facepalm when Castiel turns his back on him. “So, uh, I’m gonna go put more tokens in, and we can see if this has helped, okay? Okay.”

Dean doesn’t wait for Castiel to answer him, choosing instead to get as far away from the scene of the crime as he can. Once the pitching machine is happy and full of tokens again, he sneaks out of the cage and sits down at the bench behind home plate to watch.

And his instructions do seem to have helped, even if he was completely distracted while giving them. Castiel’s swing has quite a bit more power behind it now, and he only hits a few fouls out of the next twenty or so pitches. Dean leans back, watching his friend’s form and enjoying the view. How had he not noticed the way Castiel has filled out over the past couple years? He used to be a short, scrawny, nerdy little dude, hair sticking out in every direction, and bony knees and elbows always jabbing Dean in his arm or his side.

But now, Castiel is almost the same height as Dean. And instead of skinny and slight, he’s got the body of a runner - lean lines of muscle, with not a bit of excess or wasted space on his body. His shoulders are broad, and even under his t-shirt, Dean can see the muscles flexing as he swings the bat. And his hair now is less absent-minded professor and more *just-got-thoroughly-and-well-fucked*.

Dean lets his eyes travel the lines of Castiel’s body slowly, from his long, lean legs, and the ropes of his muscled thighs, along the roundness of his ass, which any model would be jealous as fuck of, up the curve of his back, to his strong arms. And as he’s staring and licking his lips, Castiel turns around and catches his gaze, making Dean feel like Bambi caught in the headlights of an oncoming eighteen-wheeler.

“That was better, right?” Castiel suggests.

“Oh hell yeah, that was *way* better,” Dean replies, proud that his voice doesn’t waver. “So, uh, now that it looks like you’re straightened out,” Dean has to bite back an hysterical giggle, “I think I should probably head home.”

Castiel walks out of the batting cage, leaning over to pick up his duffel bag and sling it over his shoulder. “I thought you were having supper with me and Missouri tonight?”

“Yeah, I just remembered there’s something I need to do tonight, so uh, it’ll have to be some other time.” Dean feels like a shit for lying, but he needs some space to breathe and just get away from what’s going through his head right now, and it would be near impossible to do that if he’s sitting
right next to the star of his gay panic attack.

Castiel stands in front of him, staring, as he does all the time, and is he standing even closer than he usually does? Dean would stay and ponder that, but he’s afraid if he does he’ll end up ogling Castiel again like the apparent pervy perv who pervs that he is, so he shoots Castiel another dopey grin and shrugs it off.

“Do you have time to drive me home first?” Castiel asks.

“Of course, man. I’m not gonna leave you hangin’.” Dean leads the way back to his mom’s car, opening the back door so they can throw their gear in the backseat.

When it gets too quiet on the ride to Castiel’s house, Dean starts talking about the team and the upcoming season, gibbering on and on about nonsense, just to keep things from getting even more awkward than they already feel. And after he’s said his goodbyes to his friend and dropped him home, Dean uses the rest of that evening to steadfastly ignore any and all thoughts about how he really really liked having his arms wrapped around Castiel.

The following morning is Saturday, and with rain pouring down outside, Dean opts to sleep in, since the bad weather means he’s got nothing better to do at the moment. He stays in bed even after waking up, his thoughts jumbling together over the past few weeks. He tries to avoid thinking about what happened at the batting cages last night, but not thinking about it is about as easy for him as splitting an atom would be.

If he’s honest with himself, he’s known for a long time that whatever is between him and Castiel goes way deeper than friendship. They’ve never discussed it or even acknowledged it, but Dean has known, from watching other kids around him and even from his own interactions with other kids, that what he and Castiel feel for each other is…different. When he’s not with Castiel, he feels claustrophobic, like he’s being smothered slowly by the monotony around him. But when they’re together, Dean feels at peace, like everything has opened up and he can breathe again, like the world is as it should be.

And of course he’s noticed that he and Castiel act different with each other than with others. They’ve always invaded each other’s personal space as if it were their own territory. And they stare at each other way more than is probably considered socially normal. But Dean likes looking at Castiel, and he likes that Castiel obviously enjoys looking at him, too.

It’s all just the way they’ve always been with each other, and Dean hadn’t known how unique it was until he started making friends at school. It’s cool having other friends, but Dean doesn’t find himself thinking about them when they’re not there, wondering what they’re doing, wishing he could see them, or hoping that he can talk to them before he goes to sleep. And this is how he’s felt about Castiel almost from the first moment he laid eyes on him. Their bond is always present and foremost in his mind, whether Castiel is there beside him or not, in a way that he kinda always thought a girlfriend should be.

A knock on his door jolts Dean from his thoughts. “Hey, Dean-o! You plan on rolling outta bed sometime this year?”
Dean groans, wishing he could just ignore his father and hide under his pillow and comforter. “Yeah, Dad! What’s up?”

John opens the bedroom door, leaning against the doorjamb. “I was wanting you to go with me to Bobby’s garage. I got something I need to show you.”

“Sure thing. Um, just lemme shower first, and I’ll be ready,” Dean replies, pulling the covers back and sitting up. “What did you want to show me?”

John smiles. “Just get a move on. You’ll see what it is soon enough.”

John closes the door behind him, and Dean leans over, covering his face with his hands. His parents are another concern for him with this, as much as he wishes it wasn’t so. The military isn’t exactly tolerant of alternative lifestyles, and Dean knows his dad is definitely more conservative than most. He’s not sure what his mom would think of his feelings for Castiel; he’d like to think she’d be okay with it, but since she grew up in a strict military family, too, he’s not so sure.

It’s not like he hasn’t disappointed his parents before, especially recently. His exploits with alcohol and pot have made them constantly suspicious of him, and he can’t blame them for being disappointed in his choices. But being gay, or even bisexual, it’s not a choice. It’s who he is, if that’s even what he is, so if they don’t like it, that means they don’t approve of him, not some stupid choice that he’s made. And the thought of them being disappointed even more in him because of it makes Dean feel queasy and scared.

Forty-five minutes later, Dean is standing next to his father in Bobby’s garage, still with no clue of why he’s here. He looks at John expectantly, waiting to be filled in.

John opens his arms wide, waving them towards a beat-up Firebird and a compact, older motorcycle. “What do you think?”

Dean looks at the two vehicles, then back at his dad. “About what?”

John shoots him an exasperated look, and takes a deep breath. “You remember how, when you first got your license, you kept bugging us about getting you a car?”

Dean’s eyes go wide as realization dawns. “Are you fu—frakking kidding me right now?”

John barks in laughter. “No, son, I’m not. Your mom and I have been real proud of you this past year. You’ve not gotten in any trouble—,” he hesitates, eyebrows raised, “—that we know of, and you’ve brought your grades up. We figured it was time to reward you for your hard work.”

Dean feels a twinge of guilt from his earlier thoughts, wondering if his dad would be so generous with him right now if he knew what Dean is thinking about Castiel. He tries to mask his concern by laughing and smiling wide. “Dad, oh my god! This is…I don’t know what to say.”

“How about thank you?” John teases. “And tell me which one you want. Your mom is not happy about the motorcycle, by the way. But I promised her if you chose it that we’d make sure you couldn’t go Evel Knievel on us.”
Dean walks over to the Firebird, running a hand along the smooth curve of her hood. As worried as he is, he can’t keep the goofy grin off his face as he peeks through the driver’s side window. Her interior, like the rest of her, is a mess, but Dean can see that with a bit of elbow grease and love, they could get her shining again.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” John says. “Bobby’s been tinkering with her on and off for the past six months. All she needs now is some cosmetic fixes.”

Dean straightens up and makes his way over to the motorcycle. She’s an old Honda, metal dull and dirty, and she’s missing her seat. When Dean wraps a hand around the arm of her handlebar, his mind flashes to Castiel’s long fingers gripping the neck of his bat.

“Bobby’s friend Garth brought that in a couple months back,” John says. “He was tired of fooling with it, so Bobby bought it off him. I don’t know as much about bikes, but Bobby says she should be up and running just as soon as he gets new tires and finds a seat that’ll fit it.”

Dean stands between the two vehicles, staring for a few minutes at each. The Firebird will be gorgeous once she’s done. She’s a classic, one that reminds Dean of his dad’s beloved Impala, and if he chose her, he knows he’d baby her and spoil her just as his dad does his own car.

But then he looks to the motorcycle, and out of the blue, all he can think of is how Castiel doesn’t like the confinement he feels when riding in cars.

“I think I’d like the bike,” he murmurs.

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“Get out!” Charlie exclaims that evening as she and Dean share a bowl of popcorn while watching Alien. Dean was shocked when he found it among Charlie’s movies, expecting her to be more of a Xena: Warrior Princess kind of gal, but when he expressed his shock he was rewarded with a punch to the arm that hurt way worse than he let on, and was told that Ripley is the sexiest BAMF to ever BAMF and Xena has her purpose, but Ripley will always be my go-to fap material, whatever fap material is.

“Seriously, dude,” Dean insists.

“Your parents actually bought you a motorcycle? How did you pull that off?”

Dean shrugs. “I didn’t do anything. Well, other than stop breaking curfew and coming home drunk and stoned. And I stopped failing my classes.” He stares up at the ceiling, eyes squinty. “Huh. Guess I did do stuff,” he mutters. “Anyways, I’m not gonna be able to drive it around on my own until I build up enough hours with supervision, and take this safety class, and pass their tests. So I probably won’t be driving it around until summer.”

“But still! That’s so fucking awesome, dude!” Charlie replies. “You are so taking me cruising for chicks once you get your license, you know that, right? I bet that crotch rocket will be a chick magnet.”

Dean watches Charlie stare off dreamily, and reaches over to pinch her leg and snap her out of it. “Yeah, I’ll take you for a ride, but I dunno about cruising for chicks.” He scoops a handful of
popcorn into his mouth and chews before adding, “I’m just not in a chick mood lately.” He can feel Charlie’s eyes boring into the side of his face, but chooses to ignore her as he shovels more popcorn.

“So, if you’re not in a chick mood, does that mean you’re in the mood for *dick* instead?”

Dean chokes on the kernels that get lodged in his throat, and he coughs uncontrollably, reaching for his soda sitting on the coffee table in front of him. “What the hell, Charlie!” he spits out between gags.

“I guess you’re a swallower, not a spitter, huh?” Charlie jokes, laughing when Dean hits her across the face with a pillow.

Her phone chirps, and she leans forward to check her text messages. “Looks like Ed and Harry aren’t gonna make it after all,” she sighs. “Guess it’s movie marathon night instead of gaming.”

“Yeah, Cas texted me earlier saying he had to stay in and study for some big physics test,” Dean grumbles.

He reaches for the remote control and pushes Play, but Charlie grabs it out of his hand and pauses it again. He looks at her in confusion, only to find a calculating look on her face.

“You know, you dodged me before on this,” she accuses, “and I let you because I know how sensitive and misguided your feelings are on the state of your machoism, but dude, you’re *fessing up to me tonight.*”

Dean sighs, exasperated, and decides to feign ignorance. “*Fessing up about what?*”

Charlie rolls her eyes. “Don’t even try playing the dumb card with me. We both know better.” She twists her body so that she’s facing Dean on the couch, and crosses her arms over her chest, waiting for Dean to say something.

Clenching his jaw, Dean turns to face Charlie, denial already on the tip of his tongue. But then, out of nowhere, *she gets it,* pops up in his mind. He takes a deep breath, stares at the wall over her shoulder, and takes the leap. “Okay. Fine. I maybe kind of have sort of a tiny crush on Cas.”

It hangs there for a second when Dean wants to curl up and hide his face, and then Charlie snorts. “Kinda sortatiny crush? Dude, you’re so far gone on him that you practically have stars shooting out of your eyes like laser beams! I’ve seen Disney princesses who don’t have it as bad as you do for this guy. I’m surprised you don’t have tiny birds and mice twirling your hair and making you a pretty dress so you can ask him to prom.”

Her grin and the way her eyes sparkle disarm Dean so much that he does cover his face with his hands. “Okay, fine, fine, you’re right,” Dean mutters, mostly just to shut her up. “I’ve got it bad for him, alright? But it’s not like I’m gonna do anything about it. If he isn't interested it’ll just make things weird.” Dean comes out from behind his palm, sneaks a look at Charlie. “He’s my best friend, Charlie. I can’t lose him.”

Her eyes go warm. “Oh, please,” she says. “Cas has it just as bad for you as you do for him.” She sets the popcorn down on the table in front of them. “You guys are both so obvious and gone on each other that you make me puke rainbows.”
Shaking his head, Dean smiles ruefully at her. “I wish you were right, but I don’t think so. He’s never done or said anything to make me think so.”

Charlie holds a hand out and starts ticking things off on her fingers. “Um, so, what, he stares at everybody the way he stares at you? He stands and sits as close and as often as possible with everyone the way he does you? He talks about everyone as if they hung the moon and the stars like he does you? He changes schools to be closer to everyone like he did for you? He—”

“Wait, what? He told me he changed schools because he didn’t fit in at his old school and didn’t like the people there,” Dean insists, his stomach bellyflopping at Charlie’s words.

“Yeah, but I guarantee you that’s not the only reason,” Charlie states, a smug look on her face. “Call it a hunch.”

Dean loses himself in thought for several moments, staring off into space in disbelief. He doesn’t know how or when he got here, to this moment of strange confidence, the feeling like he wants nothing more than to grab Castiel and wrap his arms around him, pull him close and never let go. He hadn’t known how badly he wanted Castiel to want him, until right now. Then again, maybe they’ve been working their way to this all along.

He jumps, startled, when a hand starts floating in front of his face. “Hello, Earth to Dean!” Charlie teases, snapping her fingers. “What are you gonna do?”

Dean glances at her. “I don’t know, Charlie,” he says, worried again now that he’s being put on the spot. “I don’t know what to do about this. Or if I should do anything. I mean, it could all mean nothing, still. Maybe he still only just thinks of me as a friend?”

Charlie scoffs. “Oh, come on. Don’t play that bullshit with me.”

“But I don’t wanna make things weird between us if I’ve got this wrong. And what if we do get together, but then it doesn’t work out? Or what if I change my mind? I’ve never been interested in guys before.”

“Oh, please. I had you pegged as a three on the Kinsey scale the second we met. It’s taken every ounce of strength I have not to call you out on it this whole time.”

Dean’s jaw goes slack in disbelief. “What? How?! I didn’t even know I might swing that way until this week!”

“No one is that obsessed with Dr. Sexy and Han Solo without wanting to get in their pants,” Charlie retorts, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Dean, seriously. You need to get a grip on your feelings and start getting a grip on Cas,” she smirks. “Life’s too short to be wasting time on a big gay freakout.”

“Says the lesbian who’s been marching in gay pride parades since she was eight,” Dean mutters.

“Says the dude who’s got a life-sized poster of Indiana Jones hanging up in his room,” Charlie responds.

“It’s not life-sized!” Dean exclaims.

Charlie huffs, leaning forward to grab the popcorn bowl. “Anyways, you know Cas isn’t going to
be the one to make the first move. He thinks you’re as straight as they come.” She snorts. “So to speak.”

“I don’t know,” Dean says, shaking his head. “I just…I need some time. To be sure. And to… figure things out.”

Charlie picks up the remote, pushing Play to start the movie back up. “I dunno, man. Don’t take too long. You won’t be this young and good looking forever.”

“Yeah, I’ll probably get even sexier as I grow older, Paul Newman or Harrison Ford.”

Dean is only aware he said it out loud when Charlie giggles and she reaches over to poke him in the ribs. “Oh mygod, you are so gay.”

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Once baseball season starts up, Dean’s life becomes even more hectic and frustrating. Hectic, because if he’s not in school, he’s either doing something baseball-related like practice or playing in a game, or he’s studying hard, prepping for finals that are just around the corner. The frustration stems from feeling like an idiot because, now that he’s aware of his feelings for Castiel, he’s turned into a pansy ass that would rather avoid his best friend than deal with the fact that he’s fallen in love with him.

He has tried convincing himself that this is just a fluke, something that will die out and revert back to more platonic feelings, but deep down he knows that’s bullshit. He’s had these feelings about Castiel for years; if he’s completely honest with himself, he wouldn’t be surprised if he’s been in love with Castiel all along. This thing between them runs so much deeper than any bond Dean has with other people. It’s a part of him, something as inherent and vital as any limb could be.

Still, he stays away from Castiel, not sure when or how or even if he wants to reveal his feelings. Given everyone’s busy schedules at this time of year, it’s not difficult to find other ways to keep himself occupied. When he finds himself around Castiel, he does his best to keep his eyes elsewhere and pretend he’s too distracted or busy to talk. He can tell that Castiel is confused and frustrated by his actions, but he doesn’t call Dean out on it.

But when he feels he can do so safely, Dean watches. From the corners of his eyes, Dean watches Castiel reading in the library on study break, perusing and turning the pages of his book with a sharp eye that Dean wishes was looking at him.

He watches as Castiel chuckles at a joke a friend makes in the hallway between classes, and Dean wishes he was the reason for the throaty laugh.

He watches across the lunchroom after playing hooky from geometry, as Castiel slides a hand through his hair, slender fingers massaging the nape of his neck, and Dean wishes those fingers were sliding through his own hair, and teasing along his own skin.

He watches as Castiel smiles at something someone says to him, and Dean wishes he was the one to make those eyes crinkle in amusement.

He watches as Castiel licks his lips before opening his mouth to speak, and Dean wishes he was the one licking those lips, parting them with his own tongue and diving in.
And he watches, for once without fear of being caught, when Castiel is on the field during their baseball games. He watches because Castiel is electrifying on base. It only took his first few games of Castiel completely mind-fucking the opposing team’s defense before word got around to the rest of the league to do what they could to keep that Novak kid off base. Which, of course, meant that coach moved him up in the batting order, making him lead off.

Whenever and however Cas gets on first base, it’s all but guaranteed that he’ll find a way to get to second. Whether he’ll distract the pitcher enough to rattle him and make him give up a pitch to the next batter, or he’ll just be too damned fast and sneaky for them to keep him from stealing second, Castiel’s trip to second base is inevitable. And once he’s on second, it’s only a matter of time before he makes it to third, and Dean soon loses count how many times Cas has stolen home by getting the catcher so worked up he loses a pitch.

He moves with a fluidity and economy of motion that takes Dean’s breath away. It’s a stunning sight to see, and one that Dean is sorry to give up, once Coach moves Dean up in the batting order. He knows it’s a compliment and a reward for being such a valuable player, but it almost feels like a punishment. He’d much rather sit on the bench and watch Castiel in all his glory. It does him no help that Castiel in a uniform is a distraction bordering on painful, and Dean is pretty damn convinced that Castiel got one size too small because there’s no way those pants should be that tight.

Occasionally, Dean can feel Castiel looking at him, but the glimpses of pain and dejection that war across his friend’s face before he has a chance to school his features cut Dean with feelings of guilt so deep that he avoids Castiel even more. He’s never been good at dealing with feelings, his own or others’, and he knows his fear of losing Castiel is pushing him even further away and hurting them both in the process. But there is still that underlying fear of rejection that Dean can’t shake despite what Charlie told him.

The dam breaks their first weekend of summer break. It’s summertime, which used to mean freedom and Castiel and pretending they’re anywhere but stuck here in Kansas. But right now, all it means is boredom, feeling claustrophobic and like he can’t breathe. Dean wants those long, lazy, summer days back. He wants his best friend back. He wants to be the person he always thought he could be, and he makes the decision to be that out of left field Saturday evening, as he stares out his bedroom window at a sky turned dark orange on the horizon.

He clatters down the stairs, calling out to his mom in the kitchen. “Mom, is it cool if I take my bike out tonight?”

Mary walks into the living room from the kitchen, drying a plate with a dishcloth. “I suppose so, honey. But only until curfew.”

“Aw, mom, it’s summer break, can’t I stay out later than ten?”

Sighing, Mary says, “Where are you going and who will you be with?”

Dean smiles, knowing his answer will get him what he wants. “I thought I’d go pick Cas up, maybe drive to Charlie’s for a bit.”

“Alright, you can stay out until midnight, but if you’re one second past that, you’ll be grounded,” Mary replies, rolling her eyes when Dean whoops.

He doesn’t bother to call Castiel to tell him he’s coming over; now that he’s decided to stop being
such an asshole and avoiding his friend, he doesn’t want to waste anymore time. Another reason being that he wants to see the look of surprise on his face when he pulls up the driveway on his motorcycle, having kept it and getting his bike license a secret for this very reason.

He’s not disappointed as he sets the bike in park and turns the engine off, looking up to find Castiel standing in the doorway, mouth open in shock. He’s wearing ratty old cut-offs, and Dean can hardly tear his eyes away from his friend’s tanned, muscular legs as Cas clears his throat.

“What the hell are you doing, Dean?”

Dean can’t hide the grin that spreads across his face. “I’m picking up my best friend for a ride on my new bike.”

Castiel looks at Dean and the bike skeptically. “Do you even have a license for this thing?”

Scoffing, Dean twists around to pull the extra helmet off the back of the bike. “Dude, you really think my parents would let me on the road without having a license for it? My mom practically made me sign a teen driving contract in blood before allowing this.” He squints up the steps at Castiel, and beckons him forth with a hand. “Cas, come on before Missouri sees it. If she does, she’ll take three hours to do a safety inspection before letting you on it.”

Castiel shoots another unsure look at Dean. “I need to at least tell Missouri I’m going out.”

“Okay, fine, but hurry it up. The open road beckons,” Dean teases.

Castiel’s lip quirks in a way that sets the butterflies loose in Dean’s stomach, but he does what he can to ignore it. Sitting back in his seat, he looks up at the night sky, staring at the stars and breathing in the warm, damp air. This brings back so many memories of their youth together, though more often than not, they were staring up at the stars from Dean’s house instead of here.

His attention drifts back to the front door as Castiel steps out. Dean’s glad to see he’s changed from the shorts into a pair of torn jeans, knowing it’d be better for his legs in case the bike gets too hot or they have a spill. He watches as Castiel jogs up to him, eyes gleaming as he stares at Dean.

“Where are we going?” Castiel asks, reaching for the spare helmet in Dean’s hands.

Dean shrugs. “I dunno. There’s nothing to do, but we’ve never needed that before.”

Castiel’s eyebrows knit together as he stares at Dean, but he doesn’t comment as he slips the helmet on. Dean scoots forward on his seat to leave more room behind him, and he waits as Castiel slides onto the seat. He turns the key and starts up the engine as Castiel tries to get comfortable.

“Just hang onto me, and follow my lead, okay,” Dean yells over the engine. “Lean how I lean, and don’t shift around too much.”

“Okay,” Castiel yells, his voice muffled by the noise. Dean smiles when he feels Castiel grab onto his hips, laughing when Castiel yelps as the bike jumps forward, accelerating up the driveway and onto the street.

Once they maneuver out of Castiel’s neighborhood and hit the open road, Dean speeds up. He’s careful not to exceed the speed limit, his mom’s voice in the back of his mind imploring him to take care. He’s also not wanting to freak Castiel out too much, but he’d be lying if he said he didn’t
like putting the fear of God into him a *little* bit, if for no other reason than it makes Castiel cling to him all the more tightly. His friend keeps his space for the first few minutes of the ride, only gripping Dean’s hips. But as the drive goes on, Castiel slides himself closer and closer to Dean, his hands finding their way around Dean’s sides until they’re splayed across his stomach. Castiel wraps himself around Dean, his body pressed against him from shoulder to groin, and Dean is thankful that Castiel can’t see the huge smile across his face.

This feels right, *perfect,* it feels like everything Dean wanted, and he doesn’t care that there’s nothing to do, or that these streets all look the same and go on and on, or that sometimes all he wants to do is keep on driving out of this fucking town and never look back. He doesn’t care because in this moment, his life is awesome, and he feels like anything is possible.

He realizes that he’s subconsciously been driving towards the lake, and *fuck,* how long has it been since he’s been out here? Probably not since that summer before high school started. As they turn onto the gravel road, he begins to slow down, the loose scree making driving at anything other than a crawl too treacherous and bumpy. He feels Castiel’s arms squeeze him tighter, and Dean wonders when the last time Cas was out here, as well, wonders if Castiel has been here without him. A part of Dean hopes not; he doesn’t like to think of Cas being able to visit “their” place without him.

As the path winds around and through the trees, it gets even harder to navigate, but Dean pushes on. It feels right that they’re coming here now, christening the bike with something from their past, and Dean’s heart twists once they finally make it through the clearing. It’s dark now, and the moonlight reflects off the still water of the lake. Weeds and grass have grown up around the shore, as well as the cabin; it looks like no one’s been here in quite a while, and Dean feels guilty for the neglect.

He inches the bike up near the pier, cutting the engine off, his ears ringing in the sudden silence. They both keep still for a moment, and Dean is pleased when Castiel doesn’t unwrap himself from behind him for several long seconds. When he finally does pull back, Dean has to clench his fists around the handlebars to keep from leaning back into Castiel’s space.

“*I can’t believe how fast everything has grown up around here,*” Castiel murmurs.

Dean takes a deep breath, looks around at the overgrowth. He feels a little tug at the waistband of his jeans, and realizes with a tiny thrill that Castiel is playing with a belt loop on his jeans. He holds his breath and closes his eyes, reveling in the feel of his friend’s touch, albeit on the fabric of on his skin.

An owl shrieks and swoops down into the weeds in front of the cabin, breaking the moment. Dean starts, turning his head to watch as the owl flies away, and he can feel Castiel’s thumb slide across his back before he reaches up to pull his helmet off. He slides his leg over the back of the bike and stands up, Dean looking over his shoulder to watch him step away. Dean leans up and off the bike himself, placing his helmet on a handlebar before walking out onto the pier.

The wood creaks below his feet, and Dean uses the tip of his sneaker to brush away old cobwebs from the planks at the end of the pier. He stands there, looking out at the water before raising his head up to look at the sky. He hears Castiel walk up behind him, but he doesn’t turn around.

“I’d forgotten how peaceful it is out here,” Castiel whispers. “I can’t believe it’s been this long since I’ve been here.”

“We shouldn’t have taken so long to come back,” Dean replies.
He can feel Castiel step closer to him, the warmth of his body seeping into Dean’s back. “Why did it take so long for us to get back here?” Castiel asks, and Dean can hear in his voice that he’s asking about more than just the lake.

Dean sighs, turning around slowly to face his friend. Castiel searches his face, eyes roaming and delving deep, like he’s trying so hard to see inside Dean, and Dean lets him, wills him to see what he doesn’t have the nerve to say. But Castiel doesn’t see it or maybe doesn’t want to see it, Dean doesn’t know; all he knows is that Castiel huffs quietly, shaking his head and looking to the boards beneath them in frustration.

“Cas, I…I’m sorry, okay? I’ve been a dick, and I’ve been trying to figure some things out, but I shouldn’t have pushed you away.” Dean watches his friend’s face, wanting to see some spark of realization of what he’s trying to say, but he finds nothing, just more confusion.

“What have you been trying to figure out?”

Dean shakes his head, and goddammit he’s not ready for this, so he resorts to telling half-truths. “I just…it’s this place, this town. I feel like it’s smothering me, like it’s trying to make me be someone I’m not. I, I feel like I can’t breathe here anymore.” Dean runs a hand through his hair and looks out at the water before continuing. “But I’m such a dumbfuck that I didn’t realize the only time I don’t feel that way, the only time I feel like I can breathe anymore, is…when I’m with you.”

Castiel looks up quickly at Dean, eyes sharp. “With me?”

Dean smiles. “Yeah. You’re the only one who knows the real me, and likes him. At least, I think you do,” he tries to joke, realizing that it’s all sounding lame and needy as fuck.

Castiel’s lip quirks. “I do. When you’re not being a douchebag and ignoring me or avoiding me, that is.”

Chuckling, Dean punches him lightly on the shoulder. “So, I’m sorry I’ve been such an asshole, and it all stops now, okay? We’re good?”

Castiel nods, shoving his shoulder against Dean’s. “We’re good. Just so long as you know the next time you act that way towards me, I’ll kick your ass.”

Dean leans against Castiel’s side, enjoying his warmth and the little thrill that runs up his spine when neither of them pulls away. “Understood.”

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From then on, it’s as if Dean and Castiel never had any distance or unease between them and never were apart from each other. But, as far as Dean is concerned, things are even better than before because there’s a spark between them, and he feels as if something has begun to fan the flames of an ember that maybe always existed.

Dean knows he’s not imagining it when Castiel sits even closer to him, legs touching under booths when they go out for burgers, or when their hands brush against each other along the table. He knows he’s not imagining it when Castiel’s fingers linger as they graze down his back, urging him
to hurry up as they walk to the treehouse. He knows he’s not imagining it when Castiel’s eyes
glance down at his lips on more than one occasion as they stare at each other.

The spark between them becomes so electrified that Dean is surprised sometimes when he doesn’t
find his hair standing on end. He can’t remember what his stomach feels like without a thousand
butterflies fluttering inside it whenever Castiel is close. He lives in a perpetual state of subdued
excitement every time he’s around Castiel, which lately, is almost every waking hour of every day.

The only times they’re not together is when Dean is working, having found a part-time job with a
local carpenter for gas and spending money. Dean was originally supposed to work in Bobby’s
garage, his dad having plotted it all out for him, but as much as Dean loves cars, he hated feeling
pressured into molding himself into what his parents expected of him. It got his hackles up that
they considered it a given that Dean would work there, no questions asked, no consideration of
what he might like to do, but Dean couldn’t think of any alternatives that his parents would accept
as a reason not to work at the garage. It was Castiel who saved the day for him.

“Why don’t you find a carpenter who’s looking for an apprentice?” Castiel suggests a few days
after their return to the lake, interrupting Dean's bitching about starting work at the garage the
following week. “You loved building this treehouse, didn’t you?”

Dean sits up from where he’s slouched on the beanbag. He stares out the window of the treehouse,
watching the rain fall through the leaves. “You think I could? I dunno if I could convince someone
to pay me to basically just stand there and be in the way.”

Castiel chuckles. “I hardly think that’s all you’d do.” He stares at Dean in contemplation for
several seconds. “You know, I think Missouri has a cousin who’s a carpenter. I could ask her about
it.”

And that’s how Dean begins his professional relationship with finish carpenter Rufus Turner, one
of the orneriest people that Dean has ever had the fortune to meet. The man stares after Dean with
so much disapproval on his face as he watches him clumsily make his way through the workshop,
that if Dean didn’t already know he was related to Missouri he would have bet money on it.

But Dean has had plenty of practice dealing with ornery people, having grown up around both
Bobby and Missouri, so he’s wormed his way into Rufus’s good graces within his first week,
though the old man would never admit it himself. Dean’s giddiness at working in a real carpentry
shop has Rufus scowling and growling for Dean to get out of his way, but more than once Dean
has spied a smile on the old man’s face when Dean does something right without having to be told
twice how to do it.

Dean loves being at work and in the shop more than he’d thought was possible, and when Rufus
doesn’t have him elbow deep in the cleanup of sawdust and shavings, he’s picking the man’s brain
about the tools of his trade and which different types of wood are best for which furniture. Dean
immerses himself in the craft, checking books out at the library to read up on it each night before
going to sleep.

John and Mary were somewhat confused and concerned when Dean first told them he’d rather
work at Rufus’s shop than Bobby’s garage. John, in particular, seemed upset that Dean wouldn’t
want to follow in his footsteps, but when Dean explained to them both why he was interested in
carpentry, and how the treehouse was what first piqued his interest in the craft, they both relented,
albeit with reservations. Dean had to clench his fists and bite his tongue to keep from snapping at
them, reminding himself once again that not so long ago he’d given them many a reason to think
the worst of his choices and actions.

The rest of that summer is spent in a blur of working a few hours each morning of the work week with Rufus, then his afternoons and evenings with Castiel. Sometimes they get together with Charlie and the other gamers, but they never seem to hang out very long, choosing instead to go off to be by themselves. It’s never a conscious or stated choice on their part; their eyes always inevitably find each other, one eyebrow rising up to signal that it's time to go. But whenever they leave, it’s not to go their separate ways. They usually either venture out to the lake for a quick swim or fishing, or make their way back to Dean’s house, climbing up into the treehouse in the cover of night amidst whispers and laughter.

Dean finds himself driving slower on his bike when he has Castiel’s arms wrapped around him, delaying each moment so that he can feel Castiel against him for as long as possible. And as the days and nights wear on, he can feel Castiel growing bolder, pulling himself tighter against Dean’s back, so tight that sometimes Dean can’t tell anymore where he ends and Castiel begins.

It’s the quiet moments after he’s parked the bike and turns off the engine, the overwhelming silence pushing in against them in the absence of the roar of the motor, when Dean can feel them both standing on the edge of this precipice. He wonders sometimes if either one of them will have the nerve to take that final step, or if something will have to push them both off the cliff, lungs gasping for air and hearts beating out of their chests.

He gets his answer late one night about halfway through summer vacation.

Castiel is sleeping over once again, and they’re both curled up on top of their sleeping bags in the treehouse. There’s a storm brewing to the west, and they have the windows open in the treehouse to take advantage of the rain-cooled breeze wafting in ahead of the storm front. Cas is telling Dean about gaming night at Charlie’s the night before, Dean having canceled at the last minute because he’d stayed late at Rufus’s and was too tired to play.

“So, Charlie picked Inias over Ed as her next knight? I bet that didn’t sit too well,” Dean chuckles.

Castiel grins. “I had to listen to Ed complain about it until Inias tasked me to help him place his archers. I’d probably still be listening to him if Inias hadn’t saved me.”

“Oh man, I am not looking forward to the next meeting then,” Dean complains, punching his pillow to make it fluffy before laying back down on his back. They lie there in companionable silence for several minutes, Dean staring up at what stars are left to see through the skylight before the storm clouds take over. He’s about to reach over and turn off the lamp so they can go to sleep when Castiel speaks up.

“Inias says I’m good at strategy, says I can see things other people might miss,” Castiel says.

His voice is tentative, so much so that Dean turns his head to look at him. Castiel is staring up at the ceiling, deep in thought. “Oh yeah?” Dean prods, and he sees Cas swallow before he replies.

“Inias asked me out.”

The bottom falls out of Dean’s stomach. His skin goes cold and clammy, and as he turns his head to stare back up at the ceiling, it’s all he can do to keep the bile from rising up his throat. “What?” he husks back, hoping like hell he heard wrong.
“Inias asked me on a date,” Castiel continues. “It was…odd. He’s been very friendly for a while now, but I assumed that’s just the way he is.”

“What did you say?” Dean forces the words out of his throat, hoping his friend can’t hear the anguish in his voice. He should have fucking known this was going to happen. Cas would like someone like himself, someone smart and creative and talented, like Inias. Not a loser like Dean.

The air is quiet between them, tense. Dean’s not sure if it’s just him feeling it, or if it’s mutual. It’s probably just him. Like all of this has all just been him, one-sided and pathetic. He sees out of the corner of his eye when Castiel turns his head to look at him, staring at the side of his face.

“I told him I needed to think about it,” Castiel replies.

Dean scoffs. “What’s there to think about?” He knows his voice sounds bitter, but he can’t help it. “The guy’s cool, right? He likes the same kind of stuff as you, he’s smart and paints and is all suave and shit,” he spits out. “He thinks you’re good at strategy. It’s a no-brainer.”

Castiel turns, looking back up at the ceiling before replying. “Maybe that’s the problem. Maybe he’s too suave and, I don’t know, experienced for me. I’ve never dated anyone before. Hell, I’ve never even kissed anyone except—”

Castiel cuts himself off before he can finish the sentence, but it hangs there. They both know what the exception to that sentence is, and it rockets the tension in the air to an almost unbearable degree.

“Can…” Castiel starts, and Dean waits a few seconds to see if he’ll continue, but he doesn’t.

“Can what?” Dean finally presses.

Castiel sighs next to him. “Would you be willing to practice with me? Like we did before?”

Dean turns his head quickly to stare at his friend’s profile, as Castiel pointedly keeps his eyes focused on the skylight above them. “What?” Dean asks, unable to believe his ears.

Castiel lets loose a frustrated sigh. “I don’t want to be kissing someone as experienced as Inias when all I’ve ever done is one awkward kiss in junior high.”

“It wasn’t awkward!” Dean protests.

“Yes, well, even so, I’d like a bit more guidance. And since you seem to have gotten plenty of experience, I thought maybe you could help,” Castiel says, biting his lip.

Dean shuts his eyes closed tightly, not believing his luck, both good and bad. Good because kissing Castiel is something he’s been fantasizing about for months, among other scenarios. But so fucking bad because all Cas is wanting is to use him to prep for some other asshole, and how depressing is that?

“You don’t have to, it was a stupid idea, just forget—”

“Okay.”

Dean turns his head to find Castiel staring back at him, eyes wide. “Okay, what?” Castiel whispers.
“Okay, I’ll help you,” Dean croaks.

And they stare at each other, and Dean feels so much déjà vu. This is just like last time, but so completely different that it’s not even in the same galaxy. This time, this time, Dean wants this so much he feels like every nerve ending is about to burst from anticipation. This time, he’s going to savor every second, every taste of Castiel that he can wring free from the moment, since this time is probably going to be his last.

Dean scoots closer to his friend, biting back a sigh as he feels the warmth from the length of Castiel’s body against him. Castiel watches him, eyes searching Dean’s face for something, but Dean is too flustered to even consider what that might be. All he can think about, all that every molecule of his body is singing right now is yesyesyes as he leans in. He pauses just before he reaches Castiel’s lips, stares into his eyes, wanting to take a mental snapshot of this moment, but before he can continue further and reach his destination, Castiel leans in and closes the distance between them.

The first touch of lips is hesitant, so very much like their first kiss. But this time, this time, Dean knows what to do. He knows what he wants, even if he only has to pretend it’s for Castiel’s benefit. He presses his lips against his friend’s mouth, pulling back a fraction of an inch to get a glimpse at Castiel, eyes shut and lashes fanned against the skin beneath. Dean leans back in, mouth more firm this time, insistent. He keeps his lips closed, just enjoying the feel of Castiel’s mouth against his own and wanting to take his time.

When he feels Castiel’s tongue against the seam of his lips, Dean can’t help the moan that escapes his throat. He opens himself up, sucking along the tip of Castiel’s tongue to welcome him in, and he hears Castiel grunt in surprise, feels his friend grab his shoulder to pull him closer. They slide next to each other, the thin cotton fabric of their t-shirts and shorts pressed between them, and this time is so very different from that last time, because this time Dean knows how fevered it will feel when he leans over Castiel, running a hand through his hair and stroking the side of his face, though the difference of stubble instead of soft skin is a pleasant surprise. This time, he knows how amazing it will feel to map out the entirety of Castiel’s mouth with his tongue, tasting and claiming it as his own, but what he doesn’t expect is how fucking hot it is when Castiel growls, pushing him onto his back so that he can cover Dean with his own body, licking deep into Dean’s mouth.

It’s so much better than the memory of before, that first kiss in junior high when Dean was too nervous and too weirded out that he wasn’t weirded out kissing a guy that he couldn’t enjoy the moment for what it was. And it’s so much better than all of his fantasies, because this is Cas, Castiel, in the flesh, pressed hot against Dean as if he’s just as eager and needing this as Dean is.

Castiel leans over Dean as he kisses him deeply, reaching a hand up to run fingers through his hair, thumb stroking along Dean’s forehead. The gentleness of it floors Dean even more than the insistence of soft lips against his own, his heart aching when he reminds himself that the caress isn’t really meant for him. He clenches his fist, holding onto the blanket underneath him to keep from grabbing onto Castiel, but when his friend begins kissing along his jaw Dean can’t help but slide his fingers over Castiel’s side, to ghost along his ribs. He ignores that little voice in the back of his mind telling him to stop, that this is too far, and selfishly takes all he can from the moment. His fingers splay across Castiel’s shoulder blade, moving with the flex of lean muscle as Castiel licks a spot at the bolt of Dean’s jaw.

Dean takes a shaky breath, unconsciously shifting his leg to open himself up more to his friend, and when he does, Castiel slides his own leg over Dean’s. The surprise of his friend’s erection, hard
against Dean's thigh, elicits a gasp of shock from Dean, and Castiel stops sucking along Dean’s neck. He doesn’t raise his head, though, and now that Dean isn’t distracted by all the kissing and sucking, he notices Castiel’s body trembling. “Cas?” he whispers, unsure of what the hard-on against his hip or the trembling body above him mean.

He can feel Castiel taking a deep breath, the exhale of warmth breath against his neck sending goosebumps tingling along his skin. Dean is frozen in place, waiting for Castiel to say something, anything, his body aching to resume the kissing and touching from before, his mind confused over just what the fuck all of this is. A crack of thunder splitting through the weighted silence makes them both jump, and Castiel raises his head to meet Dean’s stare.

They look at each other for several beats until Dean hears himself blurt, “Don’t go out with Inias.”

Castiel narrows his eyes, brows knitting together in confusion. “What?”

“Cas, this is… I don’t want you to go out with him,” Dean whispers, squeezing his eyes shut. He can’t stand to look at Castiel while he pretty much confesses his heart, it’s just too much.

“Okay.”

Dean blinks, eyes open and wide as they meet Castiel’s gaze. “What?”

“As long as you tell me why,” Castiel replies.

There is a moment when Dean considers telling Castiel to just forget it, go ahead and go out with the other guy, because that would be so much easier than confessing the truth, but he knows he can’t turn back now. After all of these years, he owes it to his best friend to tell the truth, difficult to say as it may be. “Because you belong with me,” he whispers finally, staring up at the skylight as a flash of lightning brightens the treehouse for a second.

“I know.”

Dean snaps his head to look back at Castiel. “I thought you liked Inias?”

Castiel drops his face into his hands, groaning. “I never said I like Inias.” He raises his head to return Dean’s stare. “The only person I’ve ever liked, the only person I’ve ever wanted to be with, is you.”

Dean stares at Castiel, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly for several moments because he doesn’t know what to say to that. “Why… why didn’t you ever say anything?”

Castiel rolls over to lie on his back, shoulder-to-shoulder with Dean, as he stares up at the ceiling. “I just... you never gave any clues that you might be interested in guys. You just kept going out with girl after girl. I figured... I knew what we have is... different. But I thought I was the only one who wanted to take it further.” He pauses before turning his head to stare at Dean, who can’t pull his gaze away from his friend. “But lately, it’s seemed like maybe you were feeling the same as me.” Cas looks at him, eyes wide and searching. “The way you’ve been sitting closer, and touching me more... I wasn’t imagining it, was I?”

Dean notices the wary look in Castiel’s eyes, almost as if he’s still unsure of what’s happening. “No, you weren’t imagining it,” Dean admits. He can feel his face flushing, uncomfortable with admitting what he’s been trying to hide for months. “I dunno when it happened, really. I just kinda
realized one day that I wanted more. But I figured you didn’t, so I held back, decided just to be happy with what I could get by just being friends.”

Castiel’s eyes drift to Dean’s lips, and the butterflies in Dean’s stomach begin doing somersaults again. “Can I kiss you again?” Castiel asks.

“God, yes, please,” Dean whispers, pulling Castiel closer when he leans up and over. And this third kiss is even more different than their first two, because this time neither of them holds back from showing how much they want it. Dean can feel a smile playing across Castiel’s mouth as he fits soft lips against his own, and he can’t help but grin, too. It’s obvious to Dean how inexperienced Castiel is, but the awkwardness of teeth clashing and too much saliva only make Castiel that much more adorable to Dean, though he wouldn’t say that out loud. But Castiel is a quick learner, and within minutes of studying Dean’s techniques in action, he’s able to pull a moan from the back of Dean’s throat with just the softest flick of his tongue.

Dean wraps his arms around Castiel’s waist, pulling him tighter as their kisses become sloppier and dirty. Castiel shifts, maneuvering to slide himself between Dean’s legs, and fuck this is about to get all kinds of filthy really fast, but just as Dean’s about to roll his hips up to show Castiel just how much he’s into this, he hears a clatter down below the treehouse.

“Hey, Dean!” Sam bellows up from the bottom of the ladder. “Mom said I can sleep up here with you guys tonight so I can watch the thunderstorm!”

“Again, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,” Dean mutters, as Castiel pushes himself off and away clumsily. Dean sits up, grabbing a pillow to cover his hard-on, and he smirks as he watches Castiel bundling up a blanket to hide his own erection. When Castiel notices Dean smirking at him, he rolls his eyes in exasperation, but Dean still spies a quirk of his lip as his cheeks turn pink.

Sam’s dopey head and floppy hair poke up from the hole in the floor. “So you guys are still up?”

Dean chokes, clearing his throat to cover it up. “Uh, yeah, I think we’ll be up for a while.” He looks at Castiel when Sam turns his back and winks, but Castiel seems less than amused at the wordplay.

Sam looks over at Castiel. “It’s really hot in here, Cas. Why’re you all covered up in that blanket?”

Castiel’s eyes widen, looking all the world like a thief caught with his hand in the cookie jar, so Dean comes to his rescue. “Uh, Cas wasn’t feeling too good. I think he might be getting a fever or something. So uh, he was kinda cold.” Castiel shoots Dean a look of gratitude.

“Oh, well you can have my blanket too, Cas, if you’re still cold,” Sam ventures helpfully. Dean and Castiel watch as he unloads his backpack, pulling out a flashlight, book, juicebox, pillow, and blanket.

“No, thanks, Sam, I’ll feel better soon,” Castiel replies, staring at Dean so intently that Dean has to look away for a second. He looks back at Cas with a bashful smile in the next instant, and he hears Charlie in his head calling him a Disney princess.

“Oh, cool. I’m gonna watch out the window as the storm rolls in, if you guys wanna go to sleep, I’ll be quiet.” Sam says, sitting down at the bench underneath the window, completely oblivious to the shy, flirtatious smiles his brother and Castiel keep shooting each other.
“Yeah, sure, Sammy,” Dean answers, keeping his gaze locked on Castiel as he climbs back into his sleeping bag. Castiel follows suit, pulling his a bit closer to Dean, but not so close as to look suspicious to Sam. They each lie on their sides, facing each other. Dean slides a hand up to lie on the floor between them, and Castiel does the same, placing his hand just next to Dean’s, close enough for their pinky fingers to be touching.

They stare at each other, listening as the storm gets closer, Sam’s exultations of awe at the lightning breaking the silence in between thunder claps. Dean watches as Castiel’s eyelids grow heavy with sleep, and feels his own eyes grow heavy as he fails to hold back a yawn.

Just before he falls into slumber, he hears Castiel whisper, “Goodnight, Dean,” and he feels a hand cover his own.
You know you look so tired
You’re gonna stay up late tonight
Under the stars
Well I’ll put you in pride of place
I’m gonna set my sights
I’m gonna set your soul alight
Under the stars

~Morning Parade, “Under the Stars”

The following morning, Dean wakes slowly to find wide, blue eyes staring back at him. It takes all of two seconds to remember the night before, and the relief and happiness and anticipation that zing through his body make his heart skip. Castiel is watching him, a wary, yet open look across his face, and when Dean grins, Castiel’s face softens and lights up, as if there’s a glow bursting forth through the smile that breaks across his lips.

Dean moves a hand to reach for his friend and pull him closer, but a voice by the window stops him. “Hey Dean, mom said for us to come down for breakfast in a few minutes,” Sam announces.

Propping himself up on one elbow, Dean looks over at his brother as Sam rubs the sleep from his eyes. “Sure thing, Sammy. You wanna go down and tell her we’ll be there in a sec?”

“Yeah, might as well. I think your snoring scared off all the birds this morning anyways, so there’s nothing to watch out here.”

Dean throws a dirty sock towards the hole in the floor as Sam begins to step down the ladder. “Screw you, you’re the one who snores.”

Sam’s head disappears in a fit of giggles down the ladder, and Dean realizes suddenly just how alone he and Castiel are. He can feel his face flushing as he glances at his friend, and he’s relieved to see that Castiel seems just as nervous as he feels. When their eyes meet, they both look away quickly, and Dean considers pretending nothing is wrong and making a beeline for the safety of the house when Castiel clears his throat. Dean jumps at the sound, silently berating himself for being such a pansy-ass.

“You know you look so tired
You’re gonna stay up late tonight
Under the stars
Well I’ll put you in pride of place
I’m gonna set my sights
I’m gonna set your soul alight
Under the stars

~Morning Parade, “Under the Stars”

“Dean,” Castiel says, his voice husky. Dean can’t remember exactly when Castiel’s voice dropped to such a low pitch; it’s been dropping ever since they hit puberty years ago, and has yet to stop. But he’s never heard it this slow before, and he wonders if it’s because Castiel just woke up or because of who he’s talking to. He kind of hopes he’s the one who brings it out in Castiel, but whatever the reason, Dean likes it. A lot.

He forces his gaze up to Castiel. “Yeah, Cas?”

Castiel stares at him for several beats, and Dean uses the moment to let his glance roam over his friend’s face. At some point over the years, Castiel has grown into a man. The stubble that he’d had last night is even longer and thicker, making Dean wonder how often Cas must have to shave
nowadays. When he squints or smiles, the crinkles around his eyes give him the appearance of someone older and wiser. And the lean muscles of his chest and shoulders that Dean had appreciated before are impossibly broader, exhibiting the strength within.

Dean begins to wonder how he must appear to Castiel, if he looks anything like the man Castiel does, but before he can start to worry if Castiel likes what he’s become, his friend interrupts his thoughts.

“Good morning,” Castiel replies solemnly.

Dean raises his eyebrows at his friend and snorts. “Only you could make good morning sound as serious as a UN speech.”

He grins when Castiel rolls his eyes and tries to hide a blush, using the momentary distraction to scoot closer. He leans forward, stopping just as he reaches Castiel’s lips, and stares. “Hi,” he whispers, closing his eyes and smiling when he feels a huff of warm breath against his lips.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel murmurs, as he closes the millimeters of distance between them. The kiss is soft, chaste with the tentativeness of daylight, and butterflies in stomachs, and worries of morning breath, but it’s no less monumental for the both of them, and Dean’s heart skips a beat when he feels Castiel’s lips twist into a smile against his mouth.

“Is this real?” Dean whispers, as he drifts his mouth down, making his way to the sharp line of his friend's jaw.

Castiel sighs, sliding a hand up Dean’s neck to thread fingers through his hair. “I hope so.”

Just as Dean decides to give Castiel a proper kiss, morning breath be damned, they hear the screen door of the patio slam open. “Boys! Breakfast is waiting!” Mary yells up to them.

Dean laughs, resting his forehead against Castiel’s and closing his eyes. He feels a hand on either side of his face, and opens his eyes to find Castiel staring at him with fondness. “To be continued?”

“Heck yes,” Dean concurs, placing a quick kiss on Castiel’s lips before sitting up. He shifts in place for a moment, looking around and grabbing a pillow. “At least I’ve got something to carry and hide how awesome it was to wake up this morning,” Dean smirks, crawling over to the ladder to start climbing down.

He stops as he climbs onto the steps, watching as Castiel grabs a t-shirt and shoves it over his lap. When he raises an eyebrow at his friend and winks, Castiel rolls his eyes. “Don’t give yourself too much credit, dreaming about the pizzaman has had this effect on me, as well.”

Dean barks out a laugh, climbing his way down the ladder. “Watch yourself, Cas, or I’ll tell my mom to withhold the French toast.”

“There’s no need to resort to barbaric means,” Castiel retorts as he climbs down the ladder after Dean.

Dean smiles over at him when he reaches the ground, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “Nah, you’re right. I can be cruel, but there’s some lines that should never be crossed.”

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After breakfast, Castiel rides his bike home to check in with Missouri, and to get showered and cleaned up for the rest of the day. As much as they’d both like to spend some time alone, they’d promised Charlie a few days ago to meet up with her and some of her other friends for an RPG day. Deep down, as happy as he is about how things have changed between him and Castiel, Dean is kind of relieved to be hanging around a group of people. He’s still a little freaked about what all of this means, and worried about how this changes their friendship.

When Dean arrives at Charlie’s house, Castiel is already there, sitting cross-legged in one of the bean bags thrown around the room. Dean stands in front of the door, indecision on where to sit making him feel like an idiot. His first instinct is to scoot in next to Castiel, but he knows how that’ll look to the rest of the room, and he doesn’t know about Cas, but he’s not really ready to field questions on their “relationship,” especially when he probably has just as many questions about it as anyone else would.

Castiel glances up from the book in his hands, and when his eyes meet Dean’s he smiles. Dean can feel his own face light up, and they stare at each other, goofy smiles on their faces until Dean hears Charlie clear her throat beside him.

“Are you waiting for an engraved invitation to the ass-kicking? I need some help figuring out who to put up front to lead the charge, like, today, if you can spare some time from your usual make-googly-eyes-at-Cas.”

Dean smirks, squeezing Charlie’s shoulder as he pushes her towards the large table where the game is being set up. “If you’re gonna keep giving me attitude, I may have to defect to the enemy’s side.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Charlie mocks. “I’ve got too much blackmail material on you for you to ever seriously consider it.”

They crowd around the table, debating in low voices over who to put in what position. Charlie wants to put Alfie up front because he’s fantastic at strategy, but Dean argues that the guy is too soft-hearted, and Ed’s team would find a way to use that to their advantage. Dean is so focused on discussing their game plan that he doesn’t notice Castiel has joined them on the bench at the table until he feels a hand brush against his. He turns his head to look at Castiel, who gives him a sidelong glance but says nothing.

And from then on, Dean becomes useless, because all he can concentrate on is his friend’s proximity. He wants to reach over, grab Castiel’s hand or touch his back or squeeze his thigh or… something. The warmth of Castiel’s body next to Dean makes him feel giddy, and he has to work to keep a smile from breaking out across his face. Charlie keeps talking to him, asking him questions, but everything she says is a jumbled blur because every time Dean tries to listen to her, Castiel will shift, turn his body or move his leg closer, or rub an arm against Dean’s, and the distraction is maddening. When Castiel sighs and leans away to look at something across the table, Dean can’t help but lean with him, already missing the press of his body.

“Dean, are you okay?” Charlie asks, interrupting his thoughts.

Dean raises his head quickly to look at Charlie, his eyes having been busy staring at his thigh pressed against Castiel’s. “Uh, yeah. Why?”

Charlie makes a face. “You’re acting hella weird. And no offense, but you’re sucking at
strategizing today. It’s like you’re not even here.”

Dean opens his mouth to apologize, but then it hits him that the perfect excuse for getting out of here just landed in his lap. “Actually, I feel like I might be coming down with something. You know, headache, and just, uh, not feeling all that good.”

He feels Castiel become very still and quiet next to him, and wonders if Castiel can tell he’s lying through his teeth, and if he’ll be crafty enough to find his own excuse to leave early.

“Dude, go home. I don’t wanna catch your cooties,” Charlie complains, scooting down the bench and away from Dean.

Dean snorts. “Cooties? What are we, ten?” He turns away from Charlie, catches Castiel’s glance long enough to wink at him conspiratorially, and stands up.

“Actually, I think I’m going to go, too,” Dean hears Castiel say as he’s walking towards the door. “Missouri asked me to help her with some…stuff, and things,” he finishes lamely.

Dean has to bite his lip to hold back a laugh. Castiel is good at a shitload of things, but lying sure as hell isn’t one of them.

As Dean turns to say goodbye, he finds Charlie staring at them both with beady, suspicious eyes. He does what he can to pretend he doesn’t see the look as he calls out, “See you guys later! Have fun storming the castle!”

Castiel follows closely behind him as he makes his way out the door and down the hallway leading to the front door and outside. “What should I do with my bike?” he asks Dean as they step off the front porch.

As much as Dean wants to tell him to leave it here, so Castiel can crawl behind him on his motorcycle and they can just get out of here and find some place to be alone right now, he worries it would hurt Charlie’s feelings for them to be that obvious about wanting to get away. Plus, he’s not sure either one of them are ready to let everyone know what’s going on between them, and that would definitely be a very blatant clue.

Dean chews on his lip for a moment. “My house is closer,” he says. “Why don’t we meet up and leave it there?”

Castiel smiles and climbs on his bike. “See you there,” he replies, and Dean watches as he peddles down the street, before climbing his motorcycle and turning the ignition.

The rumble of his motorcycle’s engine makes it impossible for the two of them to be stealthy and escape his house without going inside and letting his mom know what their plans are, and once inside she convinces them to stay long enough to eat lunch. So by the time they are blessedly alone and on their way, the sun has already passed its peak in the hot summer sky.

They don’t discuss where they’re going, both knowing without acknowledgement what their destination is. The pond is the one place they know they can go where no one will find them, the rest of the world apparently having forgotten it exists, if it ever knew at all. Before last night, Dean would have wanted to prolong the drive to the pond, the feel of Castiel pressed against him making him cling to the moment for as long as he could. But now, knowing that he doesn’t have to grasp at these stolen moments of touch, knowing that once they arrive there is promise of even more, Dean
is eager for the drive to end and the rest of their day to begin.

They find their way slowly along the dirt path, the motorcycle bouncing unsteadily over the mounds of dirt and grass. Once they make it through the clearing and are parked in front of the pond, Dean takes off his helmet, and listens to Castiel doing the same behind him. Neither seem in a rush to climb off the bike though, and Dean leans back into Castiel’s space when he feels strong arms wrap back around his waist.

It’s sweltering in the early afternoon sun, and Dean can feel rivulets of sweat trickling down his spine and getting lost in the waistband of his jeans, but he doesn’t pull away from the heat of Castiel’s body. He lets himself be enveloped in Castiel, the touch, the smell, the feel of his friend becomes his entire world for these precious few seconds.

Castiel hooks his chin over Dean’s shoulder. “Maybe we should get off.”

Dean chuckles. “Is that an offer?”

Sitting back on the seat, Castiel shoves Dean forward. “You know what I mean, jackass.”

Twisting around, Dean shoots him a smile over his shoulder. “You know me, I can never resist an opportunity like that.” He watches as Castiel swings a leg over, and follows suit, both of them strolling to stand behind the pier and stare out at the water. Dean is nervous, suddenly, the nerves from this morning returning full-force. He sneaks a look out of the corner of his eye at Castiel, wondering if he’s feeling the same.

“We should talk about this,” Castiel starts, shooting a quick glance at Dean before returning his stare out over the pond.

Dean’s stomach clenches in a knot. “About what?” he asks, warily.

Castiel sighs. “About, you know…us.”

Dean clears his throat and rubs the back of his neck, trying his damnedest to keep his voice from sounding shaky. “Have you changed your mind?” He hates himself for sounding desperate, needy; maybe this really was all too good to be true.

Castiel turns to look at Dean head-on. “No, I just…I don’t want to do anything to hurt our friendship.”

“Neither do I,” Dean adds quickly, maybe too quickly, judging by how keenly Castiel is returning his stare.

“So, I think maybe we should take things slow,” Castiel continues. “I’ve…I’ve never been – you know. Intimate with anyone before, not even close. So I don’t want to move things too fast, and end up regretting something.”

Dean’s not sure how to reply. A part of him is relieved by Castiel’s request because, if he’s being completely honest with himself, he’s been a bit terrified of his feelings for his friend, as well as panicky about how this kind of thing works when it’s between two guys.

But another part of him is worried that this means Castiel is having second thoughts, and is just afraid to let Dean know. He doesn’t want Castiel to feel pressured into this just because Dean’s
practically got Cas’s initials tattooed on his ass with hearts drawn all around them.

As Dean is processing all of this, he can feel Castiel’s eyes on him, watching his reaction. “Maybe it’s hard for you to understand because you have...done things with people before, and it’s not a big deal for you anymore,” Castiel adds, voice unsure.

“What? No!” Dean blurts. “I mean, yeah, I have done...things with people before. Or, with girls. Never with a guy, though. And I’ve never...I’ve never had actual...intercourse before, or anything.” He can feel his face turning a bright shade of red, and he hopes maybe the blaring sunlight will hide some of his embarrassment from Castiel. “But, Cas, it is a big deal for me, too. Mostly because it’s, you know, you.”

Castiel’s eyes widen, but he remains silent, so Dean forces himself to continue. “So, yeah, I get it, wanting to take it slow. And, I dunno, I kind of agree, I guess.” He doesn’t say what’s in his heart, that he’s terrified Castiel will change his mind, that he doesn’t want Dean as much as Dean needs him, that he feels like his whole life has led him here, to this feeling that overwhelms and exhilarates, that he’d be willing to wait forever if it meant he got to keep Castiel by his side.

Instead, he holds his hand out, waits for Castiel to thread fingers between his own, and leans over to place a chaste kiss at the corner of Castiel’s mouth. “We’re a team, right?” he whispers.

Castiel stares at him, eyes solemn and unfathomable, before nodding slowly. “You jump, I jump.”

Dean squeezes his hand before letting go. “Race you to the water,” he murmurs, before grinning and taking off in a sprint for the pier.

He hears Castiel call him an assbutt as he’s pulling his shirt over his head, and that one movement gives his friend a chance to catch up with him. So when Dean dives into the clear, deliciously cool water, he laughs in delight when he feels Castiel’s strong arm wrap around his waist.

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Dean is unsure at first of just what “taking it slow” means, so he decides to let his friend take the reins in their relationship, so to speak. What he soon realizes is that “taking it slow” means a lot of shy smiles and glances, sitting close enough to always be touching, soft sighs against warm skin, and slow, stolen kisses whenever they’re alone and feeling brazen.

And it’s enough, for now. Of course, Dean wants more, he always wants more; he is a guy hitting his sexual prime, after all. But what he’s discovering is that exploring this relationship or thing or whatever it’s called, slowly, taking their time with each other and just getting to know each other in this new way...well, it’s a heady experience, all on its own.

The few weeks since that first kiss are spent in a haze, Dean and Castiel both feeling as if they’re living in a bubble, unable to be touched or affected by the outside world. On the days that Dean works, he spends the mornings trying to hide the smile threatening to burst across his face, and Rufus yells at him more than once for being so goofy he’s going to get a finger chopped off. The afternoons find him rushing home, excited because he knows Castiel will be there waiting for him.

They do what they can to avoid hanging out with other people, both so greedy to have each other to themselves. They agree early on to keep their relationship quiet, mostly because it’s still so new and they don’t want to do anything to change it somehow, but also because they know there will
inevitably be some who don’t approve. Dean can’t even bear to consider how his parents will react if they find out about this relationship, so he avoids thinking about it as much as he can. He wishes he could just say *fuck it*, who cares what anyone thinks, but this is a small town, and unless he and Cas have a quick and sure way of handling it, they need to play things smart, for the time being. It all means that when Dean isn’t at work, their time is spent mostly at the pond, because it’s the one place they know they can be undisturbed.

If this were happening with a girl, Dean would be obsessing about how to act around her, wanting to impress and be the guy he knows is expected of him, the baseball jock who will goof off and do whatever it takes to find the quickest way inside her pants. But with Castiel, even though he’s nervous and it feels like little electric sparks popping and snapping between them whenever they get close (and they’re always close when no one else is around), Dean is also more himself than he thinks he has ever been. There’s this tension building between them, brimming to the surface every time they kiss or touch, and it doesn’t dissipate, *can’t* dissipate, because they always pull back before things get too heated. But even with that tension, Dean has never felt more relaxed and free to be himself.

He doesn’t understand what this means yet, can feel the answer hiding just beneath the surface somewhere, waiting to be found. He doesn’t care to go searching for it, though. In these first few weeks, all he cares about is being around Castiel, and it’s almost like a drug for him. When they’re not together, the world is dim, everything muted and dull and annoying - Dean finds himself irritable, becoming irrationally pissed at anything that delays his time with his friend. But as soon as he sees Castiel, it’s like a light has been turned on somewhere, and the world is as bright and exciting as it should be; his shoulders lose their tension, and his chest expands with the relief of breathing clean air after being buried alive. Dean feels as if he could run to Hell and back, if need be, just to get another hit of what being in Castiel’s presence feels like.

So, yeah. He’s got it bad. He never really understood why people compared being in love to a drug until now. The only thing that holds him back from declaring his undying devotion and pleading for more than just fleeting kisses and light touches is that Castiel asked to take things slow. Well, that and because Dean can’t help but have doubts about the depth of his friend’s feelings. Castiel has never been one to wear his heart on his sleeve, Dean has always known this. He’s more of a *let my actions speak for me* kind of guy, and Dean usually is, too. If there’s one thing that John’s Marines background has instilled in Dean, it’s “no chick-flick moments,” so Dean doesn’t like talking about his feelings, either. But when you’re wanting to hold hands and kiss and declare your undying devotion to your best friend, who’s also a guy, it’d be nice to be one hundred percent certain that that guy is totally on board with the scenario and wanting to do dirty, filthy things with you just as badly.

Other than those little pestering doubts, Dean is happy to a degree that would scare him if he took the time to think about it. But there is no time to think, because when he’s not working he’s with Castiel, and when he’s not with Castiel he’s sleeping, and none of those things leave time for worrying.

One late afternoon finds them, as usual, at the pond, sitting on the pier and watching the sun begin to set. The day started off with a thunderstorm, but by the time Dean gets off work and they make it out to the pond, the sun has reclaimed the sky, and the day is blazingly hot. Instead of cooling things down, the morning storm has just made the air muggier, the heat and humidity making everything sticky and miserable.

Dean and Castiel decide to skip cutting away the brush and weeds that keep growing back before they’ve barely finished clearing them, and instead go for a long swim to try to cool off. The water
is warm and unsatisfying though, so not long after diving in they pull themselves up onto the pier to grab a couple of sodas from the cooler. Some clouds have popped up, adding to the milky haze of the afternoon sun, and making the sunshine beating down on them just this side of bearable.

They’re both in their swimming trunks, it being too hot to add more layers. Dean has his fishing pole, but nothing seems to be biting this afternoon. He considers wandering off and trying to catch more bait, but it’s just too humid and he’s too lazy to do anything but sit there, staring out across the water. Castiel is next to him, lying on his back with his legs hanging off the edge of the pier. Dean peeks at him over his shoulder, smiling when he finds Castiel’s eyes closed.

The stillness of the air feels almost like some sacred thing, and Dean keeps his movements small and his breathing quiet, ignoring it when the fishing line jerks with a potential bite. Dean hopes to himself that the fish will leave it alone, not wanting to break the moment of peacefulness they’ve found themselves in, and after another nibble or two the fish finds something else that grabs its attention and swims away.

When Dean feels fingers touch his lower back, he sighs softly, but doesn’t acknowledge it. He’s used to the occasional touches from Castiel, finds comfort in the reassurance of his friend's presence. He feels a bead of sweat trickle down his spine, and Castiel’s fingers catch it, rubbing the moisture against Dean's skin. Dean stays hunched over, elbows sitting on his cross-legged knees, and he closes his eyes, concentrating on the feel of Castiel’s fingertips counting each knob of his spine. Any tension that Dean may have in the muscles of his back is always leeched away when Castiel does this, his caresses more soothing than they have any right to be.

Dean shivers when Castiel’s fingers trace his ribs along his side, hundred-degree heat be damned. When Castiel sits up suddenly, palm sliding down Dean’s back, Dean leans into him as a kiss is placed on his shoulder. He continues to gaze out at the pond, the bright orange and pink splashes from the sunset reflected in the water as Castiel kisses a long, dangerous line up his shoulder and onto his neck.

“Dean,” Castiel murmurs against his ear.

When Dean turns his head to look at Castiel, their faces are within a hair’s breadth of each other. “Yeah?” Dean whispers, almost cringing at how loud even that is in the waning golden light of the day.

Castiel’s eyes are dark and unreadable in the diminishing daylight, his breath shallow. He moves his hand from his own lap into Dean’s, rubbing the meat of his palm slowly across Dean’s crotch. Dean’s eyes flutter shut as he gasps, and bites his bottom lip. “Lie down,” Castiel says, leaning forward to kiss him with a surety that’s been absent from their kisses before this moment.

Dean has enough clarity to remember to pull the fishing pole from the water and set it aside before letting Castiel push him back onto the beach towel spread out behind them. Castiel lies down on top of him, and it’s the most full-on body contact they’ve had since that first kiss a few weeks ago. Dean only realizes this second just how much he’s been craving it, and he feels like his body goes from zero to sixty in three point five seconds. He can’t help grabbing onto Castiel’s hips to grind their groins together, and the feel of Castiel’s dick through his swim trunks has him almost crying out.

Castiel props his elbows on the pier below them, sneaking his hands up to either side of Dean’s face to hold him in place. His kisses are open-mouthed and wet, tongue eager as he explores Dean’s mouth. Dean isn’t usually one to just lie back and take it, choosing instead to do his own
claiming, but there’s something about Castiel’s urgency right now that makes him want to open himself up to his friend, let him do whatever feels right to him.

Between the stagnant, late summer air and the fevered rutting of their bodies, the heat is stifling, but Dean can’t stop, would never stop, even if he felt himself catch on fire. This is messy, and hot, and awkward, and perfect, the creaky wood of the pier hard and painful beneath him, splinters almost surely puncturing him through the thin beach towel, but Dean can’t care because of what’s above him, and on him, and in him, Castiel’s tongue curling around his own.

Castiel breaks off the kiss to lick and suck along Dean’s jaw, fingers finding their way to Dean's chest and teasing a nipple. Dean arches his back at the sensation and moans, his nipples always having been especially sensitive. He opens his eyes long enough to find Castiel staring at him with narrowed eyes, his head tilted as if in thought, before he slowly leans in to take the pink bud between his lips. He keeps his eyes on Dean the whole time, watching Dean watch him as he licks the hardened flesh.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Cas,” Dean mutters, his hand sliding up to press against the back of Castiel’s head.

Castiel moves to Dean’s other nipple, giving it as much attention as the first one, before sliding up to give Dean another kiss. He pulls back to stare down at Dean, breath rushed. Dean wishes the sun wasn’t setting because it’s difficult to make out the expression on Castiel’s face, the light from behind is casting his face in shadow. But in the next moment, he feels Castiel shaking, and he lets go of his hips to wrap his arms around his friend’s back, pulling him close. “Hey, what’s the matter? You wanna stop?”

As much as Dean cares about Castiel and wants to do whatever will make him happy, a part of him (the part currently perched heavy and hard as fucking steel in his shorts) really just wants his friend to make like the horny teenager he is and get off already. So when Castiel shakes his head no, Dean has to clench his fist and grit his teeth to keep from yelling a happy whoop! and high-fiving his dick.

Castiel leans down to kiss the side of Dean's neck, taking his earlobe between his lips and sucking gently. “I want you to take off your shorts,” he whispers, words wet against Dean's ear. “Is that okay?”

The butterflies in Dean’s stomach decide that moment to do a victory dance, and Dean doesn’t know if he’s more excited or terrified. A voice in the back of his mind tells him to chill, it’s just sex, it’s not like he hasn’t been groped or done the groping before with girls. But this is Cas. It could never be just sex when Cas is involved, never mind the fact that he’s also never done anything like this with a guy before, either.

Dean swallows hard, his throat making an audible click as he stares up at the shadows of Castiel’s face, wishing like hell he could see his friend's eyes. “Yeah, Cas. S’good, yeah,” he murmurs, raising his head to give him a light kiss.

Now that they’ve agreed this is what they want, they’re both hesitant to make the next step. Dean wraps his arms tighter around Castiel, giving a shaky sigh when he feels Castiel run fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. Castiel rests his cheek against Dean’s, and Dean takes advantage of the moment, kissing any skin he can find. He loves the smell of Castiel: the scent of cut grass, and cotton, and whatthefuckever fabric softener Missouri uses mixing with Castiel’s own earthy musk has always been home for him. But the taste of him, to finally know what the skin along his jaw or
the nape of his neck tastes like - if Dean could bottle that up, he’d be drunk on it every moment of his life.

Castiel shifts his body, and Dean can’t bite back the groan when his dick rubs against Castiel’s through their shorts. Castiel chuckles, a nervous thing against Dean’s bare shoulder, and pushes himself up. “I guess if we’re gonna take our shorts off, we have to, you know, take our shorts off.”

Dean can feel his face flush, a thrill skating across his skin leaving goosebumps in its wake. He sits up next to Castiel, happy that from this angle his face isn’t lost in shadow. His friend’s mouth is red and swollen, skin beneath his jaw glistening from where Dean was kissing him. Dean can’t help the grin that breaks across his face, and when he sees the confused look Castiel shoots him, he laughs.

“This isn’t funny, Dean,” Castiel complains. “Or did I do something wrong?”

Dean shakes his head quickly. “No, no, I’m not laughing ’cuz it’s funny,” he smiles, leaning forward and placing a palm against Castiel’s cheek. “I’m laughing ’cuz this is awesome, idiot.”

Castiel pushes forward, kissing the smile off Dean’s face. “I think it’d be more awesome without the shorts, though.”

And Dean would agree, but he’s too busy biting his lip and trying not to come when he feels Castiel’s hands hook under his waistband and begin pulling his trunks past his hips. Castiel is kneeling over him, and once Dean’s dick is freed from the confines of his shorts, it bounces against his stomach, precome already glistening the head. Dean takes shallow breaths as he watches Castiel stare at his cock, his gaze so intense it feels like a touch, and when Castiel licks his lips Dean whimpers, his cock twitching in anticipation.

“Cas,” Dean whispers. “Take your shorts off.” Dean stops short of begging, but if Castiel wastes anymore time he might have to change the gameplan because he needs to feel Castiel, all of Castiel, against him right the fucknow.

Castiel stands up, staring down at Dean as he slowly pushes the waistband of his trunks down the jut of his hips. It’s Dean’s turn to lick his lips once Castiel’s cock is is exposed, the length of it bobbing in the warm, muggy air. God, all the times Dean has jacked off just fantasizing about this moment, about what Castiel’s dick would look and feel and taste like, and now they’re here, and all Dean can think about is wrapping his arms around his friend and holding him close, savoring this moment because he knows it’s something he will never forget.

“C’mere,” he murmurs, holding a hand up to pull Castiel down on top of him. Castiel looks nervous, but he follows Dean’s lead, and at the first touch of their cocks together, they both gasp. Ignoring his desire to rock and rut against his friend, Dean slides his arms around Castiel’s waist, squeezing him tight and staring up into his eyes. “You okay?”

Castiel releases the breath he was holding, nodding slightly. “You?”

Dean smiles, not even bothering to hide the affection he’s feeling. “I’d be better if you kissed me right now.”

Castiel huffs a shaky laugh, moving a hand up to run his fingers through Dean’s hair. The movement slides their bodies together, and they both squeeze their eyes shut and moan from the sensation. Dean can’t help but push his hips up a bit to increase the pressure and friction, and
Castiel answers him with a roll of his own hips, as he leans down to bite and suck at Dean’s lower lip.

The kissing turns exponentially filthier after that, not so much kissing as tongue-fucking each other's mouths. What Castiel may lack in experience, he more than makes up for with enthusiasm, instinct, and sheer determination to rock Dean Winchester’s fucking world. Dean is embarrassingly close to blowing his wad within seconds of Castiel panting and moaning into his mouth as he licks and sucks Dean’s lips and tongue, cock rubbing and bumping against Dean's as they grind their hips together.

Castiel is perched above Dean, on his elbows, hands holding Dean’s head in place while they kiss. Dean is holding onto Castiel’s hips for dear life as they rut against each other, but as good as everything feels he wants more, wants to feel the heat and heaviness of Castiel’s cock in his hand. He slides a hand between their bodies, wrapping his fingers around Castiel’s shaft and pulling forth a loud, desperate groan from his friend.

“Dean, oh god, yes,” Castiel mouths wetly against Dean’s shoulder. Dean feels the cock twitch in his hand, becoming impossibly harder and thicker. He makes a loose fist, letting Castiel fuck into it and swiping a thumb over the head to grab some of the come and smear it along Cas's length. Their naked bodies are slick with sweat, the heat and humidity combined with the desperation between them making Dean feel as if they’re on the surface of the sun, and he wants to scream from the frustration and need for release. He sneaks his other hand between them, grasping his own cock and squeezing it next to Castiel’s. He tries to rut alongside Castiel, but he doesn’t have room to gain as much friction as he needs. He settles for jacking himself, sweaty palm on one side of his dick with Castiel’s stiff shaft along the other. Between the two of them, they quickly have enough precome to make things gloriously slick and dirty, and Dean curses when he thinks about his dick being covered in Castiel’s wetness.

Finally, Dean can feel his balls begin to tighten, heat pooling in his gut. Castiel is still fucking into his fist, and sucking at the pulse point of his neck, grunting each time Dean squeezes the underside of the velvety head of his cock. With each thrust he makes into Dean’s hand, Castiel whispers Dean, Dean, Dean against Dean's neck, his name said as if it’s cherished, hot breath mingling with the mixture of sweat and spit. It tears something inside of Dean, something that becomes loose and desperate to find its way out. “Cas, I need … I need you,” he whispers hoarsely, and they’re not the words he meant to say, but are the only ones he has the courage to bare right now.

Castiel pulls back to stare at him, and Dean finds himself almost thankful that the sun has now set, already feeling too open and vulnerable to meet his friend's eyes. He takes a shaky breath when Castiel leans in, lips ghosting over Dean’s mouth, and whispers, “I’m here, Dean. You have me.”

Dean comes apart at those words with a muffled cry, his exultation swallowed down as Castiel covers his mouth with his own. He knows he should probably be embarrassed that, given that he is more experienced, he shot his wad before his friend did, but Castiel follows only a few seconds after. Hearing Castiel moan fuck in his ear while feeling the warm spurts of release between their bodies is definitely going on Dean’s list of Favorite Things Ever.

After a few moments of lying on top of Dean as they try to catch their breath, Castiel rolls over, settling in beside him. They stare up at the stars that are starting to shine in the darkening sky, both silent and content. Just as Dean’s about to start dozing off, he feels the pinprick of an insect stinging his thigh, and tries to slap the mosquito away ineffectually.
“So, that was all kinds of amazing,” Dean says. He turns his head to look at Castiel, who continues to stare up at the sky.

“The sex or the mosquito?” Castiel asks, a smirk slowly making its way across his face.

Dean shoves at his arm, but ends up with their fingers laced together, Castiel’s thumb rubbing circles against his wrist. “Joke all you want, but you’re the one who’s gonna end up with mosquito bites all over his ass.”

Castiel laughs, one of those rare, whole-body laughs that makes his nose crinkle and his smile get all gummy, and Dean thanks the heavens that there’s a full moon out so he can actually see his friend’s face because that’s it, that’s the face that he’d be happy seeing every day for the rest of his life.

“We should swim, get washed off,” Castiel decides then, pushing up on one elbow. “Then go for some cheeseburgers and pie?”

“Y’know, I’m starting to believe all that angel shit because it’s like God made the perfect being and sent him to me,” Dean quips.

Castiel snorts, standing up and holding a hand out to Dean. “You’re so easy. All I have to do is mention cheeseburgers and pie, and you’re happy.”

“And sex! Don’t ever forget the sex part, Cas,” Dean replies, taking Castiel’s hand and standing up.

Castiel leans in, kissing Dean’s neck and behind his ear. “Don’t worry, Dean. I could never forget the best part.” Dean closes his eyes, grabbing Castiel’s waist and pulling him closer. He’s considering forgetting all about supper and maybe trying for round two despite mosquitos and a hungry belly, but he yelps when Castiel slaps his ass and turns to jump in the pond.

“Last one in pays for pie!” Castiel yells, diving headfirst into the water.

“Oh you are in trouble now, Novak!” Dean mutters, unable to hide his grin.

Not long after, they start getting ready to go back to school. Most of his classmates are excited to start their senior year of high school, but Dean isn’t. He knows his dad is going to really start putting the pressure on him about trying to get a baseball scholarship; in fact, John already does mention something about baseball and college at least a few times a week.

Dean doesn’t know what he wants to do once he graduates. He tries to avoid thinking about it as much as he can, but it’s getting harder and harder to keep his head stuck in the sand when everyone around him is talking about it. The only thing that scares him more than the thought of leaving Lawrence is the thought of being stuck here forever. He knows he’s meant for more, can feel it in his very bones, but this is home, and he can’t imagine leaving it behind.

His fear and uncertainty about the future becomes more of a concern one afternoon the weekend before school starts. Dean stops by Castiel’s house to pick him up, as they can go over their class schedules with Charlie. Castiel is still in the shower, so Missouri leads Dean into the den, all the while chiding him for having a grease stain on his jeans from his motorcycle.
Dean is used to Missouri’s disapproving ways by now; he even makes a sport out of finding different ways to make her smile against her will. So when she flips her towel at him and complains about him getting stains on the furniture, he just shoots her a cheeky grin and promises he won’t sit down. She leaves him alone to wait and entertain himself, but after a few minutes he gets bored and decides to head up to Castiel’s bedroom.

He stops in the hallway on the way to the stairs, hearing voices in Dr. Novak’s office. He always does his best to avoid Castiel’s father when he can, since the cold man has always given him the creeps, so he pauses just outside the door, and is just about to turn around and go the long way to the stairs to avoid being seen when he hears Dr. Novak ask who was at the door.

“It’s Dean Winchester, sir,” Missouri replies. Dean can hear her moving things around, so he assumes she’s probably straightening up the office. Dean had asked Castiel one time why Missouri still worked for them, since he’s pretty much grown up and definitely doesn’t need a nanny anymore. Castiel said that Missouri took on more of a household manager role once he got older, and Dean always wondered why she’d want to hang around a place like this any longer than she had to, though he didn’t mention that to Castiel.

He hears Dr. Novak sigh, and there’s a rustle that sounds like maybe he’s reading a newspaper. “I had really hoped that Castiel would have grown out of his Winchester phase by now.”

Missouri huffs. “I don’t see that happening any time soon.”

“Well, even so, it’s just one more year. This time next year he’ll be going off to school, and then he’ll be forgetting all about the likes of Winchester.”

“I’m sure he will, sir,” Missouri agrees, and Dean doesn’t want to hear anymore. He turns and jogs down the hallway, knocking over a picture on the foyer table in the process.

He knew that it was expected by pretty much everyone that Castiel would follow in his father’s footsteps, but Dean has been able to avoid thinking too much about it. Deep down, he knows he was hoping that maybe Castiel would change his mind about it, would choose to stick around Lawrence, or go along with whatever Dean decides to do. He knows it’s shitty to expect his friend to just drop everything to follow him, and that’s not really what he had been hoping for; he’d wanted Castiel to want to stay with him, to find something that would make him happy separate from Dean, but that would keep him close.

He makes his way up the stairs, passing by the bathroom, where he can still hear the water going in the shower. Once in Castiel’s room, he flops down on the bed, and stares up at the high ceiling, his limbs feeling heavy with dread and uncertainty. If Castiel is going away to college, he’ll surely go to some fancy school that Dean would have no hope of getting into. He’ll be leaving Dean, and going off to a new life, and this won’t be happening in a far distant future; it’s all going down in a year. In one short year, everything will be different.

Dean closes his eyes, tries to stop thinking so much about it. He wishes they could go back to just a few weeks ago, when they were in the middle of summer vacation and had no cares in the world, other than finding ways to be alone together as much as possible.

He hears a chuckle from the doorway, and opens his eyes to find Castiel standing there, towel wrapped around his waist and hair dripping wet. Castiel closes the door behind him, walking over to the bed and sliding on top of Dean. He looks down at him with a smile on his face, beads of
water dripping from his neck onto Dean’s chest, and dampening his shirt.

“Missouri and your dad are downstairs,” Dean says. He wants this, always wants anything Castiel is willing to give, but his insecurities are making him want to just cling and not let go, rather than getting the both of them off.

“That’s what door locks and very good insulation are for,” Castiel replies, leaning down to suck at the juncture of Dean’s neck and shoulder.

Dean sighs, never able to resist Castiel for more than a few seconds, and he goes to reach for Castiel’s towel to pull it off but hesitates when he feels Castiel go still above him. “Is something wrong, Dean?”

Dean opens his eyes to find Castiel gazing at him, brows furrowed in concern. They stare at each other for several seconds, Dean contemplating telling Castiel what he heard, but he decides against it. He doesn’t want to ruin the last few days before school starts by getting into a fight, and he knows that’s what will happen if he opens up to his friend right now. Instead, he slides a hand under Castiel’s towel, fingers massaging the soft flesh of Castiel’s ass. “I’m just needing there to be less clothes between us,” he teases, smirking as he runs a finger along his friend’s crack.

Castiel bites his lip and moans, and after that, it’s a rush of movement, limbs flailing and urging to pull Dean’s clothes off. Soon Castiel is wearing more than Dean, as he’d neglected to pull his towel off in his determination to perform Operation: Get Dean Naked. He stands by the side of the bed, staring down at Dean’s body, eyes roaming the length of him from toes to eyes. “Someday, I plan to lick and kiss every inch of you,” Castiel murmurs, a possessiveness to his voice.

Dean’s breath hitches at the words. He feels exposed, not just physically, but emotionally, as well. He wants Castiel to claim him like that, and the insinuation that they have many more moments like this in their future is exactly what he was needing to hear right now.

Castiel spreads Dean’s legs wider, moving to stand between the vee they make, his own knees against the edge of the bed. He unwraps the towel from his waist, letting it drop to the floor. Castiel’s cock is already half-hard, and Dean moans as he watches him grasp it, giving himself a few strokes before kneeling down to the floor. Dean props himself up on his elbows, his heart beating faster once he realizes what Castiel is about to do. They’ve never taken things further than fumbled hand jobs and rutting against each other, both still too oddly shy and nervous to try anything else. Until now.

“Scoot down,” Castiel whispers, mouthing at the knob of Dean’s knee. It tickles, but not enough to ask him to stop, so Dean slides down the bed a few inches, licking his lips when he sees just how close that gets his cock to Castiel’s face. He fucking whimpers when Castiel starts to lick and suck at the inside of his thigh, his cock twitching in anticipation. Castiel’s hair is still wet from his shower, curls glistening against his forehead. Dean reaches to move the hair away from his face, a gentle caress of his thumb against the skin of his forehead that has Castiel opening his eyes and staring at him. Their eyes remain locked as Castiel moves to suck at the junction between thigh and groin, Dean’s breath catching when he feels Castiel’s stubble rub against his balls.

Castiel slides a hand slowly up Dean’s thigh, fingers teasing behind his balls before wrapping around his shaft. Dean grunts at the sensation, but doesn’t take his eyes away from Castiel’s as he shifts upwards, licking a wet line from the crease of Dean’s thigh to his hipbone. Castiel bites hard at the jut, then licks a soothing kiss before sucking so hard that Dean has to wonder, staring up at the ceiling, if he’s trying to suck the bone straight through his skin. It’s just this side of painful, and
Dean’s beginning to realize just how much he likes it kind of rough when his vision whites out and a cry escapes his mouth as he suddenly feels wet, hot suction on the head of his dick. He looks down to find Castiel staring up at him, full, pink lips wrapped around the swollen tip, and all oxygen has left the fucking planet because this has to be the hottest thing in existence.

Castiel’s fingers are wrapped tightly around the length of Dean’s cock as he suckles at the plump flesh of the head. He watches Dean watching him, eyes fluttering shut every few seconds as if he’s tasting dessert from a Michelin-starred chef, and Dean groans at the thought that Castiel is actually getting off on the taste of him. It’s filthy as fuck watching the head of his dick slide between those lips, spit mixed with his precome dribbling down Castiel’s chin, a line of it slicking down the bulging vein along his shaft. Castiel pulls back long enough to tongue at the slit, the tip of his tongue teasing it before moving to the underside of the head. Dean’s cock twitches as that clever tongue alternates between massaging and flicking, and he has to bite back a cry, because this pace is maddening.

Castiel is taking his time, and Dean can’t figure if he’s doing it for Dean’s benefit or his own, and the thought of Castiel enjoying this even more than him brings more heat to pool in his groin. Another bead of precome pulses from the tip of Dean’s dick, and he watches as Castiel spies the liquid, licking a path from the base of Dean’s shaft to the head, where he sucks the droplets down greedily, moaning and licking his lips.

“Jesus, Cas,” Dean mutters, grabbing the bedspread with each hand and fisting it, because holy mother of fuck, what did he ever do to deserve someone as gorgeous and wanton and filthy as this.

Castiel glances up at Dean and smirks, before opening his mouth and sucking Dean down whole in one go. Dean loses all coherency and almost consciousness after that because Castiel goes to town on him, swallowing him down deeper than anyone has any right to go, gag reflex be damned. Each time Dean feels the head of his cock bump against the back of Castiel’s throat, the sick fucker swallows, and the suction has Dean cross-eyed and crying out. He really hopes his friend was right about the good insulation, because when Castiel starts humming and moaning around Dean’s dick, his head bobbing up and down like some pornographic bobble-head doll, Dean loses all control, screaming out “Fuck!” as he blows his wad straight down Castiel’s throat.

He has his eyes squeezed shut, whimpering incoherently as Castiel licks and sucks him through the aftershocks of what has to be one of the most life-changing orgasms anyone has ever had, as far as Dean is concerned. He feels like Castiel not only sucked his boner, but sucked every other bone right out of his body, and now he’s just a pile of goo, unable to move or talk or think. Castiel has bled him dry, yet when Dean hears his friend’s mouth pull off the head of his dick with an obscenely wet pop, he can feel his dick twitch with a bit of interest. Down, boy, he thinks, almost giggling hysterically.

He slits one eye open to look at Castiel, who is still kneeling beside the bed. Dean can hear the faint slap of skin, and realizes that Castiel is jackiing himself off. “Hey, hey, c’mere,” he mumbles, motioning with a hand for Castiel to sit up next to him.

Castiel grunts, standing up and sliding next to Dean with a hand on his cock, the red, swollen head peeking out from his fist. Castiel leans over and gives Dean a kiss, and the taste of himself on Castiel’s tongue is weird, but not gross. It makes him feel oddly possessive, as if he’s now claimed Castiel as his own. “I can, y’know, help you with that,” Dean whispers, watching Castiel continue to jerk himself.

“I don’t think you could move right now even if the house was on fire,” Castiel chuckles, breathing
heavily against Dean’s mouth.

Dean closes the gap between their mouths, biting at Castiel’s lip, which elicits a whimper from his friend. “I don’t have to move much if you fuck my mouth,” Dean whispers, his words wet against Castiel’s lips. Castiel’s eyes open comically wide, and Dean grins at the look of shock on his friend’s face. “Where do you want me, and how do you wanna do it?”

Castiel stares at Dean for a few more seconds, almost as if he’s trying to gauge whether or not Dean is joking. “Slide back towards the headboard, and prop your head up with some pillows,” Castiel finally whispers, voice hoarse.

Dean feels a little thrill ghost across his skin at Castiel’s words. His tone is just shy of a command, and Dean never would have guessed before, but the thought of Castiel using him like this, using his mouth to fuck and get off, it’s something he thinks they should explore a lot in the future.

He feels raw and exposed as he weakly pushes himself up the bed, Castiel kneeling at the other end and watching him closely. His dick lies spent against his thigh, still wet with Castiel’s spit, and it should feel gross, but it doesn’t. Dean's heart flutters as Castiel starts to crawl his way up the length of his body, settling himself with knees on either side of Dean’s head. And, hello, dick in my face, Dean thinks. But before he can let himself start freaking out about it, he hears Castiel murmur Dean, please above him, and suddenly he’s staring up at Castiel’s face and opening his mouth, and Castiel is placing his dick on his tongue, and absurdly, Dean wonders if this is what it feels like to receive communion.

Above him, Dean watches as Castiel stares down, breaths shallow and lips parted. Dean closes his lips around the head of Castiel’s cock, suckling gently when he feels a drop of precome burst across his tongue. The taste isn’t the greatest thing in the world; it’s not apple pie or a cheeseburger, but it’s not too bad, definitely not like how he had been expecting. Dean swirls his tongue around the head experimentally, finds the skin satin smooth, and he feels a distinct sense of pride when he pulls a gasp from Castiel as the tip of his tongue prods at the slit.

Castiel grasps the wood of the headboard above Dean with both hands, his eyes never leaving Dean’s mouth as Dean sucks along the head. When Dean notices Castiel’s thighs quivering, he pulls his mouth away from his friend’s dick. “Cas, are you gonna fuck my mouth, or what?”

Castiel laughs shakily, reaching down to grab his cock and shove it back into Dean’s mouth. And then he starts moving, slow, shallow thrusts, at first. Dean is grateful he starts slow because he knows that, unlike Castiel, he actually does have a very healthy gag reflex. He closes his eyes, trying to adjust to the sensation of a cock sliding in and out of his mouth, and once again being surprised to learn that it’s actually kind of hot. He’d always thought that to be on the giving end of a blowjob would just be a necessary evil sometimes, something you’d have to do occasionally if you’re having sex with a guy and you want to ever be on the receiving end. But this is almost obscene in its realness, the vulnerability of each of their positions making it earth-shatteringly sensual.

Dean grabs the backs of Castiel’s ankles, anchoring them both as Castiel’s thrusts become deeper and faster. Castiel grunts as he thrusts, watching, mesmerized, as the shaft of his cock slides back and forth between Dean’s lips. Dean can do nothing but lie there and take it, take everything Castiel gives him, staring up with his face open and trusting.

Castiel’s movements become more erratic, his breathing more labored, and Dean tries not to choke as his friend goes deeper than he’s prepared for. And suddenly, he feels hands grabbing the back of
his head as Castiel thrusts one last time before freezing, his body rigid as he cries out and spills his seed into Dean’s waiting mouth.

As much as Dean knew to prepare for it, it’s still a shock when the first strings of come hit the back of his throat. He swallows back a choke, and the constriction around the head of his cock makes Castiel groan, as he pulls back and grasps the base of his shaft. His cock is still spurting, and Castiel slowly jacks himself, beads of come splashing across Dean’s cheeks and lips. Dean wonders how something as ridiculous as this could be so hot, and why his first instinct is to open his mouth wide, trying to catch the milky liquid with his tongue. Castiel moans when Dean parts his lips, positioning the tip of his dick over Dean’s mouth so that he can drink down whatever Castiel has left. Dean gazes up at him, his eyes wide and taking everything in as Castiel finishes himself off.

Castiel opens his eyes and looks down at Dean, eyes raking over his face. He wipes his thumb across Dean’s cheek, smearing the come there and swiping it to the edge of Dean’s mouth. Dean parts his lips and wraps them around his friend’s thumb, sucking the come off of it as Castiel watches, eyes hooded. He takes his other thumb and does the same on Dean’s other cheek, swiping the come to Dean’s lips so that he can lick it off and swallow it down, before leaning down and kissing Dean with a fierceness that he’s never felt from Castiel before. His tongue fucks into Dean’s mouth hungrily, chasing the taste of his own come down Dean’s throat.

Dean wraps his arms around Castiel’s waist, pulling him tight against him, their spent cocks bumping lazily against each other. After several minutes of making out, they both seem to lose their adrenaline rush, Castiel kissing softly along Dean’s jaw before laying his head down onto Dean’s bare chest. Dean closes his eyes, threading fingers through Castiel’s hair and humming, thinking about what just happened and how much he’d like to do it all again sometime.

“You are one filthy fuck, you know that?” Dean laughs quietly, kissing the top of Castiel’s head.

Castiel snorts, sliding a leg between Dean’s and snuggling in closer. Dean had given up the weak protests that he’s not a cuddler weeks ago; Castiel was able to see right through that, especially when every time they woke up together Dean would be wrapped around Castiel tighter than an octopus on steroids. “Takes a filthy fuck to know a filthy fuck,” Cas teases.

Hey, you don’t see me complaining, Nastiel,” Dean jokes.

Castiel raises up on one elbow to stare at Dean. “If you ever call me that, don’t expect me to suck your dick ever again.”

Dean presses his lips together to keep from laughing. “Call you what, oh King and Master of My Loins?”

Castiel rolls his eyes and lays his head back on Dean’s chest. “That’s more like it.”

Awesome sex aside, Dean still can’t seem to kick the worry of what will happen after graduation, and it puts him in a foul mood for the rest of the day. Castiel notices, but doesn’t prod into the whys of it; he just makes sure to give Dean any space he may need, as that’s what is usually required to get Dean out of a funk. What Castiel doesn’t know is that space between them is what’s causing the majority of Dean's funk, so it puts them in this weird push-pull back and forth dilemma.
that Dean isn’t sure how to get out of, especially since he doesn’t want to tell Castiel what’s wrong.

They finally make it over to Charlie’s house that afternoon, and Dean is relieved to see that no one else is there. He’s just not in the mood to deal with lots of other people. Charlie pulls their schedules up on the school’s website, and they’re all ecstatic to learn they share a lunch period.

“Fucking finally!” Dean exclaims. It’s not that big of a deal, since they see each other after school, but since none of them share the same interests in school or take the same classes, it’s frustrating that Dean can go an entire school day without seeing his closest friends.

“Hey, Cas,” Charlie says. “Since when are you into woodworking?”

“What?” Dean squints at the screen and then back at Cas. “You didn’t tell me you wanted to take a woodworking class!”

Castiel smiles, fidgeting with the book in his hands. “I wanted it to be a surprise. I figured it’d be one sure way to see each other at least once during the school day, especially if we hadn’t ended up with the same lunch or study periods.”

Dean grins at his friend. “You? Are awesome.” Before he remembers where they are, he leans forward and plants a kiss on Castiel’s mouth. He feels Castiel go still against him at the same time he hears a quiet gasp next to them.

“I knew it!” Charlie screams. “I knew you both were way too happy lately! I KNEW IT!”

Dean hangs his head and squeezes his eyes shut, laughing in spite of himself as he feels his face flush. Castiel shifts next to him, leaning closer as he rubs a hand across his back.

“How long? How long have you two been an item?” Charlie asks, her voice sounding accusing.

“It started this summer,” Castiel sighs. “We didn’t tell you because, well, we didn’t tell anyone because we weren’t ready to share it. We didn’t know how people would react—”

“Oh, come on! Hello? Lesbian?”

“—And we wanted this to be just something for us for a while,” Castiel continues. “We didn’t hide it because we didn’t trust you, we just…we weren’t ready to share. Okay?”

“So that’s why I haven’t seen you guys hardly at all this summer, right? Why you always sneak off?”

Dean raises his head to meet her gaze. “I’m sorry, Charlie,” he apologizes. “We really didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. We just…” He pauses to look at Castiel, who grabs his hand and threads their fingers together. “We just wanted to be by ourselves for a while, and figure stuff out on our own.”

Charlie rolls her eyes and fights to hide a smile. “Figure what out? Like how you both have been disgustingly in love with each other for, like, forever? I’m pretty sure anyone who’s been around the two of you for more than five minutes could tell you that already.” She lets loose a sigh, turning her chair around to look back at the computer screen. “So, anyways, we’ve all got lunch together, you and Cas have woodworking class together, and Dean, you and I have study period together.”
Charlie taps away at her keyboard as Dean and Castiel both study the back of her head. “So, you’re cool with everything now? Not still mad we didn’t share-and-care with you?” Dean asks, confused.

Charlie glares at him over her shoulder. “Ugh. Yuck. No. You know I don’t like Hallmark moments. Save that crap for your pillow talk, asswipe.”

Dean leans back in his chair, chuckling. “I knew we were friends for a reason.”
But you started a war that we can’t win  
They keep erasing all the streets we grew up in  
Now the music divides us into tribes  
You choose your side, I’ll choose my side  

~Arcade Fire, “Suburban War”

The first couple months of senior year fly by way too fast for Dean. It’s a happy time for both he and Castiel, though not as carefree or filled with lazy days wrapped around each other as their summer break was. Dean’s not sure how he could have survived the school days without spending time with Castiel at lunchbreak and their one class together.

He worries sometimes that he’s become too attached or dependent on Castiel, especially when Cas still seems to enjoy activities outside of his time spent with Dean. He tries not to be jealous of Castiel’s extracurricular activities or his friends outside of their own circle; he tries not to feel like maybe he’s not enough for Castiel, that maybe he really is just a phase, like Dr. Novak had said. It’s those days that he becomes morose, pushing himself away from everyone out of fear.

He tries to regain some interest in baseball, knowing how happy it would make his dad. He wonders if maybe baseball is the answer, his key to getting out of this town and finding something to focus on so that he won’t be so clingy and needy with Castiel. But he quickly finds that his heart just isn’t in it anymore. He dreads the day when he won’t be able to postpone the talk with his father any longer, will have to tell him that he’s quitting baseball. He’s already had the fight with Victor about it, and it was ugly. Victor said it was wrong for Dean to abandon him and the team after all this time and hard work, and Dean yelled for fifteen minutes trying to get it across to Victor that he was sorry, he hated letting everyone down, but he just didn’t have it in him to play anymore. Victor finally realized that if Dean kept playing when he was miserable, he’d just be bringing everyone else down, and he grudgingly forgave him, with a pat on the back and a promise to kick his ass if he didn’t at least come and watch the home games.

Dean neglected to inform Victor that another reason he decided not to play is because Castiel isn’t playing either, and he’d rather spend more time with him.

Sometimes, Dean feels like a coward for not being more open about their relationship. He tells himself that both he and Castiel are tough, they could handle any kind of teasing or bullying they’d get. Besides, it might do some good for a jock to come out as bisexual. But this is his life, not some afterschool special, and what’s going on between him and Castiel is personal and special and precious to them both. If Dean can avoid having everyone in school and town ripping it apart and turning it into a joke, he will. If it gets out, fine, he’ll face it all head on. But until then, he and Cas belong to themselves.

Dean still blocks out all thoughts and worries about his parents discovering their relationship, not able to deal with the pictures he gets in his mind, the looks of disappointment he’s sure he’d see on their faces if they ever find out.

The only time someone at school learns about them is completely Dean’s fault. He and Castiel are
sitting together at lunch, and as usual Charlie, Alfie, Ed, Harry, and Corbett drift over as soon as they've filled their trays. The first week of school, Dean had protested sitting together with all of them, worrying about some of his jock friends seeing them and figuring out his double life. But after Charlie’s bitch, please face and Castiel refusing to speak to him because of it, he’d relented. He soon realized he kind of enjoyed hanging with them everyday, or at least with Charlie and Alfie; the others he tolerated, on his better days. He’s relieved to discover Victor and his other friends don’t seem fazed at all about who Dean chooses to sit with, and with this one simple move he’s able to feel more like himself at school than he ever has before.

Lunch period is immediately after woodworking class, so Dean happily gets two hours of Castiel right in the middle of his school day. They’d had an especially productive class this morning, with Castiel carving swirls in the spindles of a chair while Dean pretended to sand the seats as he watched Castiel’s fingers slide and wrap around the pieces.

Dean stares at Castiel across the lunch table after class, a lascivious grin on his face. “You sure know how to handle your wood, Cas,” he says with a wink. “Are you good with really hard wood?”

Castiel narrows his eyes at Dean, shifting imperceptibly in his seat. “Depends on what kind of wood you’re talking about, I guess. And how hard it is.”

“Oh, it’s pretty hard, I think. And it gets harder the more you—”

“Oh, for the love of Xena, will you two get a room already? Jeez, I’m trying to eat!” Charlie demands, popping open her soda can.

Castiel’s face turns beet red as Dean tries to hide a smile behind his hand. He can feel everyone’s eyes on them, and when he looks up, they’re all looking from him to Cas and back again with varying degrees of disbelief and shock on their faces. He hears Corbett whisper very loudly, “See, Ed, I told you it's normal to—”

“Shut up, Corbett!” Ed hisses at him, eyes bugging out, before turning to Dean and Castiel. “This better not fuck up the battle next weekend, because if one of you sacrifices the team to save the other, there’s gonna be some ass kassage happening, Brokeback.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” Dean counters. “Why would we need to sacrifice the team to save each other?”

“Like if one of you gets captured?” Ed snaps, with a stab of his finger towards Dean. “Our enemies will use the power of your gay love to pierce through our defenses. It’s the oldest trick in the book.”

“What the hell kind of books have you been reading?” Dean scoffs. “Okay, look, first off, it’s a game. Chill the fuck out. Two, if anybody around here is getting captured, it’ll be one of you jackasses, so don’t you go worrying your dorky little head about us sacrificing the team just for you. Three, don’t you ever fucking call me Brokeback again. And four, if any ass is getting kicked around here, it’s gonna be—”

“Alright, that’s enough, put the measuring sticks away, I’m sure everyone’s penises are nice and long, okay boys?” Charlie remarks, holding up her hands. She looks down the table at everyone. “And if anyone goes blabbing to anybody about Dean and Cas’s Love That Shall Not Be Named, they’re gonna have to answer to me. And trust me when I say that’s a can you never want opened.”
Two of the four guys audibly gulp as they stare at Charlie, wide-eyed and nodding in the affirmative. “Now, can we move on to more acceptable meal-time discussions, like the blood and entrails of our enemy?” she suggests, taking a swig of her diet Dr. Pepper.

Yep. She’s definitely the little sister Dean never knew he wanted.

In October, Sam is able to convince their parents to take him and Jo to a Vampire Weekend concert in St. Louis. It’s a long drive - over four hours there and back - so they’ll have to spend the night in St. Louis, and it takes Sam the better part of a month to convince them, finally agreeing to make it his next Christmas and birthday present combined. The only reason they’re able to get tickets is because Ellen knows a guy who works backstage at the venue, and she’s able to pull some strings - and the only reason she agrees to do it is because she’s grateful Jo has decided to make Sam her boyfriend instead of some of the deadbeats who’d been skulking around her daughter the past year.

When Dean hears Sam and Jo are a couple he proceeds to tease both of them mercilessly for weeks, alternating between making fun of their relationship and making fun of their music tastes, because no self-respecting Winchester should ever listen to anything named *Vampire Weekend*. Every time Jo visits, he follows her up the stairs, calling her a high-school cougar, and telling Sam he’d had no idea he was on the lookout for a sugar mama. The only thing that finally gets Dean to let up on the both of them is Sam innocently asking one day what it is that he and Castiel get up to when they run off alone together all the time. Dean’s not sure if his little brother has figured them out yet, but he’s not going to give him reason to investigate any further for now.

The concert happens the Saturday before Halloween, and Dean doesn’t know who’s more excited for it, him or Sam. Because with his family out of town, it means he and Castiel will have the house all to themselves for an entire night. It’s not something he’d thought could happen until they’re graduated and on their own, and he has to work very hard to hide his excitement from his family.

John and Mary are wary at first about leaving Dean unchaperoned for an entire night, especially given some of the unsavory things he’s done in his past. But when they hear that Castiel will be spending the night, they both look relieved, believing that Castiel will keep him out of trouble. Dean has to bite back a grin at the thought of what kind of trouble he’s hoping he and Cas will get up to all on their own.

They stand on the front porch, waving goodbye as the Winchesters and Jo and Ellen drive away around lunchtime that Saturday. Dean laughs when he feels Castiel pinch his ass, turning around to pull him inside the house. They slam the door shut, fumbling with each other’s pants as they make out against the wall in the foyer, laughing and giddy at the thought of being alone for twenty-four hours with nothing to do but be lazy, watch movies, eat junk food, and make out constantly - hopefully with the making out turning into nonstop sex all night long, if Dean has anything to say about it.

Dean has really needed this time alone with his best friend. He’s missed him more than he’d like to admit these past several weeks. Castiel’s schedule seems to become more hectic with each passing week, his AP classes taking up quite a bit of his free time as he meets for study sessions. Dean wants to ask what he’s studying for, wants to know what Castiel’s plans are, but he’s too scared to find out the truth. He knows that some of Castiel’s time is spent drawing for his art class, but more and more is spent on science and math, the classes that have nothing to do with drawing and
everything to do with getting the proper credits on his way to becoming a doctor.

With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, Dean admits to himself that Castiel is preparing for college and then med school, and that means he’s preparing to leave Dean.

But this weekend isn’t about that, so Dean does his best not to think about it. He tries not to cling too tightly as he wraps his arms around Castiel, pulling him into the den so that they can lay on the couch and find something to watch on TV as they make out, taking their time with each other.

“Should we be going out and hanging out with other people for a while?” Castiel asks, sighing as Dean kisses his way across his jaw and down his neck.

“No,” Dean murmurs against his skin. “We should take full fuckin’ advantage of this weekend by being hermits and never leaving each other’s side.” He pauses a moment, smiling against the pulse point in Castiel’s neck. “Unless we gotta take a shit, of course. My codependence does have its limits.”

Castiel snorts, but doesn’t reply, his hands finding their way underneath Dean’s sweatshirt, fingertips playing with the knobs of Dean’s spine, just like they always did last summer when they were lazy by the pond. Dean hesitates for a moment, insecurity making him wonder if that wasn’t Castiel’s way to try to put distance between them. “Unless you want to go and hang out with the others, of course,” he adds hastily, dreading what Castiel’s answer might be.

“Dean, you know I always enjoy our time together, and our… talks,” Castiel whispers, before biting at an earlobe.

Dean laughs, doing his best to hide the relief from his voice, “This is the best definition of talking I’ve ever seen.”

Castiel pulls his head back to stare up into Dean’s eyes. “I intend to do a lot of talking for the next twenty-four hours, Dean. In fact, we may be hoarse from all of the talking we’ll be doing. Very hoarse, and very sore.”

“Why Cas, that might be the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me,” Dean teases.

“Shut up and talk to me,” Castiel growls, thrusting his hips up.

A couple of fantastic handjobs later, they’re sprawled across each other on the couch, a bowl of popcorn on Dean’s stomach as they watch Raiders of the Lost Ark. Castiel had wanted to watch something newer that they’d not seen a thousand times before, but when Dean insists, pointing out that Indiana Jones increases his horniness to an alarming degree and therefore everybody wins, Castiel relents.

Once the sun has set, Dean orders a pizza, and they forego plates, choosing to set the box on the floor between them as they watch Kill Bill: Vol. 1. Dean grudgingly admits that it’s a pretty badass movie, even going so far as to agree to watching Volume 2, but not before pulling out the sweet potato pie his mom had made for them before she left. They nuke two enormous slices for themselves in the microwave, sling a generous dollop of whipped cream on each, and curl up on the sofa together to eat and watch the movie.

Dean ends up watching Castiel eat his pie more than the movie, becoming utterly distracted by the way Castiel licks the prongs of his fork, chasing the crumbs of the flaky crust. At one point, he
gets a tiny dot of cream on his upper lip, and Dean is about to lean over to lick it away, but at the last second Castiel does it for himself. Not being able to forget the thought of Castiel plus whipped cream equals awesome, Dean dips a finger into the remaining cream on his plate, and leans over to wipe it onto Castiel’s mouth.

His friend looks at him, eyes squinty and confused, until Dean leans in and whispers, “You’ve uh, got something on your lip,” and licks the cream away.

Castiel smiles at him, a look full of fondness and affection and so much of something that it robs Dean of his breath. And when Castiel leans in, murmurs “Let’s go upstairs,” against the side of his mouth, all Dean can do is nod because, yeah, that’s the one thing he wants to do more than anything else in the world.

Dean doesn’t remember much about the trip from the couch to his bed, other than Castiel holding his hand. He doesn’t remember much about how they end up naked, other than Castiel whispering undecipherable words against the soft, downy skin behind his knees. He doesn’t remember much about how or why they decide that tonight is the night they will finally have intercourse, other than Castiel pleading as he kisses along the back of Dean’s shoulders, “Please, please, I need you inside me.”

But Dean does remember every moment after that. He will never forget the look of complete trust Castiel gives him as he lines his cock up with Castiel’s entrance, having worked for so long to open him up, with fingers sly and curved that Castiel is crying out for Dean to fuck him. He will never forget Castiel's words whispered wet against his ear, “You jump, I jump,” as the head of Dean's cock breaches Castiel, and how everything feels too impossibly tight, as if he will burn up on entry. He will never forget the way it feels when Castiel grips him tight, fingers bruising his shoulder as Dean pushes in further.

And Dean will never forget that first moment when he is fully sheathed inside of Castiel, frozen still, as if the entire world is holding its breath, and he looks down into his best friend’s eyes and realizes, with the clarity that one only feels maybe a few times in life, that this is home.

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Dean grins as he checks his latest text message from Castiel.

“Ugh, you guys are disgusting,” Charlie complains.

Dean throws a pencil across the table at her. “Hey, I can’t help it if Cas misses the big D.” Dean pauses as he catches Charlie raising an eyebrow at him. “Okay, yeah, I’ll never refer to myself or my dick as the big D again.”

“So, why is he skipping out on us this time?”

Dean and Castiel both were supposed to meet up with Charlie at her house for gaming night, but Castiel had bailed at the last minute. It’s become an all-too-frequent habit of his lately, and Dean’s relieved to discover he’s not the only one annoyed by it. “He has a big chemistry final to study for.”

“You know, he’s not the only one around here having to cram for tests and stuff,” Charlie snipes. “But at least I schedule my study sessions so I don’t have to cancel on my friends all the time.”
Dean rolls his eyes and slams his notebook shut, tired of trying to read when everyone keeps distracting him. “Yeah well, unlike you, Cas has a few other priorities besides just school and friends.”


“Oh, yeah, me! And himself. Do you have any idea how exhausting the teenage male libido can be? I’m surprised either one of us has the energy to do anything else.”

Charlie pounds her forehead on the table. “Gross, Dean. Now that I’m scarred for life and will be investing in a lifetime supply of brain bleach, has Cas said anything about visiting any college campuses any time soon?”

Dean sits up straighter, the grin from before immediately leaving his face. “What? No. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just wondering. He’d said something about flying to New England to visit a couple of campuses over Christmas break.” Charlie shrugs. “I was wondering if it’s any that I’ve applied to.”

Dean can feel his stomach dropping even further. “Wait…you’re going away to college, too?”

Charlie meets his eyes, a look of confusion on her face. “Uh, yeah. Why wouldn’t I? I mean, University of Kansas is great and all, but it’s here. Last thing I wanna do is stay here longer than I have to.”

Dean doesn’t say anything for a long time. He hadn’t even considered the possibility that Charlie would want to leave, too. That she was already making plans to get as far away from here as possible. He wonders if she and Castiel talk to each other a lot about getting out of here. And away from Dean.

“So, Castiel is sure he’s going to med school? And that he doesn’t want to go to the med school here?” Dean hates the way his voice sounds right now. Reedy and desperate and everything he doesn’t want to be.

Charlie sighs. “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked much about it. To be honest, I was kind of expecting him to go for something in art instead.” She watches Dean closely for several beats before continuing. “Have you guys really not talked about this?”

Dean shrugs her off, and pushes away from the table. “No. And I really don’t wanna start with it now.”

Charlie keeps after him. “But dude, haven’t you thought about what you wanna do? I mean, maybe take some writing classes, or hell, I dunno, go into carpentry or something?”

Dean grabs his coat and his keys, and stuffs his books into his bag. “I don’t wanna talk about it right now, okay?” he reiterates shortly. “Besides, I need to go, I promised Sammy I’d hang with him more anyways.”

He runs out the door and up the stairs without looking back.
A couple weeks pass, and Castiel still hasn’t mentioned his plans for Christmas break. A part of Dean doesn’t want him to bring it up, because then it will be real. Then they’ll have to discuss what will happen when they graduate, and he’s not ready to admit this is going to end.

But the agony of not talking about it, of knowing it’s there, looming on the horizon of their relationship, is weighing him down, making him miserable and unable to fully enjoy the time they do have together. As a result, he’s not sleeping well, his grades are beginning to show that he’s distracted, and he’s moody and snappy with everyone around him.

At the end of English class one day, his teacher pulls him aside. Dean’s afraid he knows what she’s going to say. His last couple of essays have sucked, and it was just a matter of time before she calls him out on it. What’s even more frustrating is he’s just too tired to care anymore.

“Dean, have you been okay?” Ms. Holmes asks.

Dean nods, pulling his backpack tighter across his shoulder. “Yes, ma’am. Just haven’t been sleeping good lately.”

She smiles, shuffling through some papers on her desk. “You just haven’t seemed yourself, not in class or in your papers.”

“Yes, ma’am, I know. I’ll try harder.” He side-eyes the door, wondering if he can go ahead and say his goodbyes and try to sneak away.

“But that’s not why I stopped you,” she continues. “I was wondering if you’d be willing to take on some extra work.”

Dean’s attention snaps back to his teacher. “Uh, is that a trick question?”

Mrs. Holmes laughs. “Well, I guess in a way it is.” She smiles at him before continuing. “Dean, I see a lot of promise in you and your writing. I think with some encouragement and instruction, you have the potential to go far with it.” She pauses, watching him closely. “Have you ever given any thought to becoming a writer?”

Dean doesn’t know what to say. Ms. Pickens’s words from sophomore year come back to him; he’d pretty much forgotten about what she said because he’d assumed she was just blowing smoke up his ass to get him to try harder. But now, having a second teacher say almost the same thing to him, he starts to wonder. He’s always enjoyed writing, thinking up stories and adventures and putting them down on paper, but he never gave any thought to doing it for anything other than his own (and Sammy’s and Castiel’s) enjoyment. “No, ma’am, not really.”

She pulls a pamphlet from one of the smaller stacks of papers on her desk. “There’s a writing workshop on the university’s campus over the spring. It’s worth extra points for your class here, but can also be used as a credit in college, if you decide to enroll.”

Dean takes the pamphlet from her, opening it up to see happy-looking strangers, all sitting in a circle in front of a teacher in a blazer and a whiteboard. It looks almost exactly how he’s always pictured college, right down to being some place he most likely wouldn’t fit in. “I don’t know…” he murmurs doubtfully.

“Just think about it, okay? It’s for fantasy and sci-fi writers, if that does anything to tempt you,” she
adds.

And that actually does sound tempting, much to Dean’s surprise. He wonders distractedly what everyone would say if he told them he was going to a writing workshop, all without being forced or coerced into it.

“Okay, yeah, I’ll think about it. Thanks, Ms. Holmes,” he replies, turning and walking out of the classroom.

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Castiel tells Dean about his trip to New England a couple weeks before Christmas break starts.

Dean had been hoping that maybe Castiel had changed his mind, but no such luck. The way he tells Dean about it suggests that Castiel doesn’t see it as such a big deal; he just mentions in passing one evening as they’re watching a Walking Dead marathon that he’ll be gone a few days before their Christmas break begins to check out a couple campuses in New England, and that he already cleared it with his teachers.

“It’s no big deal,” he says, with a handwave. “I’ll be back in time for Christmas.”

He says it like Dean’s heart isn’t breaking at the thought of Castiel leaving him behind, and Dean can’t help blurring out, “So, that’s it? You’re just gonna go off to school somewhere, become a doctor and never look back?” He stares at the TV screen as he says this, not daring to meet Castiel’s eyes and letting him see how scared he is, but he can feel Castiel’s eyes boring into the side of his head.

“Is that what you think?” Cas asks after a minute.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” Dean responds.

Castiel sighs. “I don’t know what I’m doing, other than agreeing to do as my father asked.”

Dean finally pulls his gaze away from the TV to meet Castiel’s eyes. “So, what are you saying? That you don’t want to go to med school?”

“Dean, I don’t know.” Castiel runs a hand through his hair, and Dean notices for the first time that he looks more stressed than he has ever seen him. He’s used to Castiel always being the calm one, never being flustered, so it’s a shock to see his friend so tense. “But I don’t see what harm could come from me just visiting a couple of campuses.”

Dean snorts, returning his gaze to the TV to hide his frustration. “I thought we were a team,” he mutters under his breath. He doesn’t say it loud enough to be heard over the TV, and he’s beginning to think Castiel didn’t hear it at all. But after a few minutes, he sucks in a breath when he hears Castiel whisper, “I thought so, too,” before curling into a ball against the side of the couch and falling asleep.

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The day that Castiel flies to New York with his father, Dean doesn’t see him off. He knows he’s pouting like a child, but he can’t seem to make himself stop. Castiel texts him goodbye, suggests
that maybe they could try to have a movie night at his house when he returns, since his dad will be staying behind in Massachusetts for a conference, but Dean doesn’t answer him.

Instead, he locks himself up in his bedroom for the rest of the day and night, sulking and ignoring the outside world. He doesn’t bother to come downstairs for supper, and falls asleep listening to some emo crap that Sam had downloaded on his computer one time to “broaden his horizons.” No one’s horizons should ever have to be that broad, Dean thinks to himself just before dozing off.

The following day, he forces himself to leave his bedroom, but only makes it as far as the treehouse before collapsing in a self-pitying pile of bones. It’s cold, but not freezing, and Dean is too lazy to turn on the space heater, so instead he just crawls under a stack of blankets, pretends the world doesn’t exist, and tries to go back to sleep. Of course, that’s the moment when Sam decides to butt his giant forehead into Dean’s business.

“Dude, what the hell is wrong with you?” Sam mutters from the ladder, as he climbs up into the treehouse. Dean would make fun of his voice cracking, puberty playing havoc with his little brother, but he’s too busy pretending the world doesn’t exist.

“Leave me alone, Sammy,” he croaks from underneath the blankets.

“Dean, it’s either me coming up here and bugging you, or Dad,” Sam replies. “I figure I’m the lesser of two evils for you.”

Dean pokes his nose out from under the covers. “What about Mom? I’d rather have her.”

Sam snorts. “Mom is too busy making vats of tomato-rice soup and cherry pie for you, since she assumes you must be starving after not eating supper last night or breakfast this morning.”

Dean sniffs, and hides himself back under the blankets. “Seriously, Sammy. Just leave me alone.”

There’s silence for a couple minutes, but Dean knows Sam hasn’t left because the kid can’t move without sounding like a moose in a china shop, still not having gotten used to his suddenly freakishly long, gangly limbs.

Sam clears his throat. “Is it Cas?”

“Sam—”

“Look, I know, okay? I know.”

Dean pulls the blankets down off of his face to blink owlishly at his brother. “You know what?”

Sam shoots a bitchface at him. “Oh come on, Dean. It’s not like the two of you are all that good at hiding it. The way you look at each other, and the way you are around each other…it’s obvious. And even if it wasn’t, I would have figured it out after seeing the two of you trying to suck each other’s faces off.”

“WHAT?!”

Sam laughs. “Uh yeah, one night I came out here to hang with ya’ll, and I guess I wasn’t loud enough coming up the ladder, because I got an eyeful, and—”
“Oh god, Sammy, shut up!”

“—and I just want you to know that I, uh, I’m cool with it, okay? Not that you needed it, but you have my blessing.”

They both remain silent for a few minutes, Dean in utter mortification, and Sam most likely in amusement, though Dean doesn’t dare look at him to find out. There’s so many things that Dean wants to say to his little brother, so many things that he realizes suddenly he should be apologizing for, not least of which would be possibly scarring Sam for life with the show he and Castiel most likely gave him.

But as is usual with Sam, he seems to know what’s on Dean’s mind before just about anyone else. “I used to kind of resent Cas, y’know.”

Dean holds his breath for a second, waiting to hear if Sam is continuing before pushing the blankets off of him and sitting up. “Look, Sam, I know—”

“But I get it now. What the two of you have…he doesn’t replace me.”

Dean shakes his head. “Of course he doesn’t replace you, Sam. No one could ever take your place.”

Sam smiles across the treehouse at Dean. “Yeah, I know that now. I think nowadays I’m just kind of jealous sometimes that you guys found each other so young. Not many people can say that.”

Dean stares down at his hands. “I don’t know if what we have is all that special. I think Cas might be ready to move on once we graduate.”

“Is that what this is about?”

Shrugging, Dean shoots Sam a sad smile. “He’s gonna go off and be some big-shot surgeon, while I’m stuck back here, probably trying to get engine grease out from under my nails for the rest of my life.”

“You don’t know that’s gonna happen, Dean.”

“It’s what Dr. Novak thinks. Cas is too good for me, and he’ll grow out of me sooner or later.”

“Dr. Novak is a snobby prick who knows nothing about his own son,” Sam insists. “Dean, you can’t believe what that asshole says.”

Dean wipes a hand across his eyes. “I’m just dragging Cas down to my level. I’m not good for him.”

“You’re an idiot if you really believe that,” Sam says. He watches Dean for a minute. “If that’s what you really believe, then why don’t you go to college and prove him wrong?”

“What, like get a baseball scholarship like Dad keeps bugging me to do?”

“Sure, or just go to school on your own without baseball. It’s what I’m gonna do,” Sam adds.

“Oh yeah? Are you still wanting to be a lawyer?” Dean’s missed talking to his little brother; it’s the
one thing he’s always able to count on to calm him down and make him feel better.

Sam smiles. “Yep. I even know where I want to go to school now, too.”

Dean can feel the smile fading from his face even before he asks. “And where’s that?”

“Stanford,” Sam replies, practically bouncing from giddiness.

“The one in California?” Dean knows the answer, but he has to ask anyways.

“Uh, yeah. Where else?” Sam laughs. “I think Jo is planning on applying there too, but we’re not being all crazy and expecting to still be together by then. If we are, great, but if not, hopefully we’ll still at least be friends. I mean, the Harvelles are practically family anyways, so we’d be assholes if we didn’t stay friends when we broke up, right?”

Normally, Dean finds Sam’s excitement infectious, and he’s usually always happy to live vicariously through his brother when good things happen to him. But this time, it just feels like the final straw that broke his weak, pathetic back, and it’s all he can do to smile and pretend he’s happy for his brother.

Sam’s leaving him, too. And not only that, he’s ecstatic to do it.

Dean knows he shouldn’t be taking this personally. He knows that the world does not, in fact, revolve around him. But at this moment in time, all it feels like is that everyone he loves is running away from him, and he has nowhere to go. He’s going to be left here, staying the same while everyone else moves on and finds better lives without him.

He does what he can to convince Sam that their talk has made him feel better. He goes inside, takes a shower, and announces that he’s going to Charlie’s for a while.

But he doesn’t go to Charlie’s. For the first time in a long time, Dean just needs to forget his life for a while. So he goes to visit an old friend, and welcomes a sweet taste of oblivion.

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Dean learns a very important life lesson that evening: never take a joint from a guy named Don.

There are more lessons to be learned from this experience, but that’s the one that sticks out in his mind as he’s sitting in the jail cell, waiting for his Dad to come bail him out. Knowing his dad, Dean wouldn’t be surprised if he’s left to sit on his ass and wait in his cell for a while, thinking about what he’s done. And what he’s done is pretty bad, by most people’s standards. The aforementioned Don just so happened to unknowingly be friends with an undercover cop, who decides that tonight is the night to make his big drug bust.

If Dean had left five minutes prior, like he’d been considering, he would have missed all the excitement. If he had just stayed home sulking instead of looking for an escape, he would have been fine. Then again, if he’d been about a hundred yards closer to the school, he would have been facing a minimum two-year jail sentence, so he supposes that as bad as his luck is, it could have been a hell of a lot worse.

But it’s not so easy to convince himself how lucky he is when he gets a glimpse of his father’s
They don’t speak to each other until they’re in the Impala and on the way home. Dean considers asking if they can go by Andy’s house to pick up his motorcycle, but he thinks better of it. The silence between them is oppressive, and Dean has to stop himself from fidgeting because he knows the movement will make his dad blow his lid.

“Is this what’s been going on with you lately?” John finally asks, his voice quiet.

Dean finds himself to be more creeped out by how calm his dad seems than he would be if he was screaming and yelling. He takes a deep breath, says, “No, Dad.” And it’s the truth. He hopes his dad can tell he’s being honest, but he wouldn’t be surprised if his dad never trusts him again. “I just - I’ve just been trying to figure some things out lately.”

“And smoking pot helps with that?” John replies testily.

Dean stares out the window. “I just needed to get away from everything for a little while.”

“And smoking pot helps with that?” John reiterates.

Dean doesn’t reply. There’s no answer he can give that will explain why his choices last night felt like the best possible solution for the moment. He knows it was quite possibly the stupidest thing he’s ever done, in a long line of stupid things he’s done, and he already regrets it, will always regret it, but there’s nothing he can do about it now except face the music.

“You know they might not let you try out for the team now,” John says.

Dean knows he should let it go. There’s no point in opening up that can of worms when they already have about ten thousand cans of worms opened all up in the car right now, but something in him says fuck it, in for a penny, in for a pound. “I wasn’t planning on trying out anyways.”

And that’s what finally blows the top off his dad’s head.

“What?!” John has the presence of mind to pull over onto the side of the road before he starts letting loose. “What did you just say to me?”

Dean takes a deep breath. “I wasn’t going to try out this year.”

“And why the hell not?” John fumes. “Enlighten me, Dean, because last I heard you were all gung-ho about baseball. You were going to use it to try to get a scholarship, for god’s sake!”

“No, dad, those were your ideas, not mine!” Dean can feel his gut twist with nerves, because as much as he’s wanted to say these words to his dad for years, doing so makes him feel like he’s destroying his dad’s dreams and stomping on them with his boots.

“What are you even talking about, Dean?”

“I never wanted to go on with playing baseball, and I sure as hell didn’t want to use it to get into college,” Dean bites out, voice rising in pitch. “You pushed me into it, just like you always push and bully me into doing everything, and I’m fucking sick of it!”

“You watch your language with me, boy,” John warns.
Dean turns to stare at his dad, and what he sees is a stranger looking back at him. He feels like there’s so much he doesn’t know about his dad, and he wonders if he has ever really known him at all. “You know what? I can walk home.” He reaches for the door handle and pushes himself up and out of the car before John even has time to stop him.

“Dean, get your ass in this car right now!” John yells.

“I can walk home!” Dean yells back over his shoulder, pulling his jacket tight against the frigid winter air.

“Fine, you wanna be a stubborn jackass, then go for it.” John rolls up his window and starts the car, tailspinning back onto the pavement and kicking up gravel and dust in Dean’s face.

Left behind on the verge, Dean shivers and hopes he doesn’t regret getting out of the car, especially since he doesn’t have his gloves.

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Two days of constant fighting in the Winchester house, and they’re still nowhere close to resolving things.

Dean stays in his room most of the time, because seeing the faces of his family makes him feel like the biggest asshole in the world. He will never forget the look his mom gave him when he first arrived after his long walk back home; the disappointment in her face will haunt him for many years, he knows.

He will be suspended from school for two weeks, effective once school starts back after break. And, as John feared, he’s been banned from trying out for baseball - but Dean couldn’t care less about that. The one relief out of everything is that the charges against him have been dropped, considering his lack of a previous record, and that they’d not found any drugs actually on him at the time.

What hurts the most, at this point, is how his family looks at him. What their wary expressions tell Dean is that they see a stranger in his shoes. He’d come so far in gaining back their trust after the stupid stunts he’d pulled before, but now all that had healed between them has been crushed, possibly irrevocably. As far as his mom and dad are concerned, every word that comes out of Dean’s mouth could be a lie, and it’s killing him that his own family acts as if he can’t be trusted to tell them the time of day, let alone be believed when he swears that nothing like this will ever happen again.

The shit really hits the fan when John decides the only answer is to send Dean off to military school for the rest of his senior year. And at that point, what was a battle between Dean and everyone else becomes a war waged between John and Mary.

When John drops the military school bomb over dinner, Mary sends both Dean and Sam to their rooms, and their parents proceed to fight like nothing Dean has heard before. They had fights close to this when John was still in the Marines, Dean recalls, and he remembers hearing his mom cry herself to sleep after John stormed out of the house, more times than he could count. He’d actually forgotten a large bit of those days, and he wonders if his subconscious forgot it on purpose.
Dean never really understood what his parents’ fights were about back then. All he knew was his mom was hurting, and he hated his dad for making her cry. But listening to his parents fight now, he’s finally getting some clues about why their family was almost torn apart, and how they ended up in Lawrence.

He sneaks out of his room, and sits down at the top of the stairs, listening to their heated words.

“How could you ever think this was a good idea? That I would ever agree to send my child off to have him groomed into that kind of life?” Mary yells.

John slams his hand down on the table. “Mary, he needs more discipline than we can give him right now. We’ve coddled him too much, and now look what he’s turning into!”

“We came here to get away from that! I grew up in that life, and I was miserable, and I always swore that my kids would never live that kind of life.”

John scoffs. “Yeah, and then you went and married a Marine, so we see how much you stuck to that plan.”

Dean can feel the hurt of those words even from where he is, and the room below is silent for several beats before Mary continues, voice icy and quiet. “More than once, I wish I’d never met you. But I did. And we can’t help who we love.”

“Mary, I—”

“But when you agreed to leave the Marines, I thought you’d finally realized how much it was tearing us apart. How much it was hurting our kids to not know if their father would return home after every mission. How much I didn’t want my babies to believe it was their duty to serve and give their lives over to a thankless job. Yet here we are.”

Her words are resigned and cold, and Dean hates himself because his mother’s voice should never sound like that. Her voice is supposed to be soft and warm and teasing and caring, not hopeless and broken.

“It will be the best thing for him, Mary. He just needs to be shaken up a bit, shown how hard life can be sometimes. It’ll give him character.”

“Character?” Mary spits back. “It will strip everything about him that I love away. It will brainwash him and convince him that he’s only good for the military and nothing else. You’re pushing him into doing the exact thing I wanted to keep my children from.”

Dean returns to his room before he can hear anymore. He feels as if he’s going to vomit, so he holds his head between his knees until the sickness passes. How could he have screwed everything up so monumentally? Not only is his life fucked, but he’s broken his mom’s heart, opened old wounds, and quite possibly will be the cause for his parents’ divorce, if things continue like this.

He is the most worthless, pathetic piece of shit that’s ever existed.

Across his room, the text notification on his cell phone beeps. He grabs it and sees a text from Castiel.

*Am back home. Wanna meet up?*
“God, I missed you,” Dean chokes out. He feels like he hasn't seen Cas in years, after everything that’s happened. He’s grounded, obviously, but at this point, he figures how much harm can it do if they realize he’s snuck out.

Yeah, I’ll come to you, he taps back. Be there in a bit

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It takes longer than Castiel was probably expecting, since Dean has to steal Sam’s bike to get there. They’d collected Dean’s motorcycle from Andy’s house, but John promptly took Dean’s keys and hid them, saying it’ll be a long time before he’s allowed to drive it again, if ever. Dean knows where John stashed them, because he’d figured out all of his parents’ hiding places within six months of moving here, but he’s too tired to sneak around and try to get them without his parents seeing him.

When Castiel opens his front door, he opens his mouth to speak but stops himself once he gets a good look at Dean’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve really fucked things up, Cas,” Dean croaks, his voice breaking. Castiel pulls him inside the house, grabbing onto his hand and leading him up the stairs. Once they’ve reached his room, he shuts and locks the door behind him and pulls Dean into his arms, where Dean proceeds to lose his shit. He sobs, wrapping his arms tight around Castiel, clinging to the back of his sweatshirt. He buries his face into the crook of his friend’s neck, and he knows he’s getting tears and snot all over him, but he can’t stop. He’s been holding everything in for so long, and now Castiel is here, and he can let it go.

Castiel holds onto him, rocking him slowly and rubbing circles along his spine. He keeps whispering soothingly into his hair, “Sssshhh, sshhh, it’s okay, it’s gonna be okay,” and Dean wants to cling tighter and never let him go.

Once his tears and hiccups start to subside, Dean pulls away and reaches for the box of tissues on the nightstand to blow his nose and clean himself up a bit. Castiel watches him closely but doesn’t say anything until Dean seems to have collected himself.

“What’s happened?” he finally asks, after Dean shoots him a watery smile.

And Dean proceeds to tell him everything, leaving out the part where he was freaking about everyone leaving him because he doesn’t want to look like even more of a baby than he already does. Castiel listens patiently, not interrupting to tell Dean he’s an idiot, or that he should know better or anything else Dean thinks he deserves. Once he’s done, Castiel just stares at him for several moments, concern etched across his face.

“Why did you go hang out with those people, anyways?” he finally asks.

Dean shrugs. “I dunno. I was bored, I guess.”

It’s a lie, and Dean can see Castiel knows it, but he doesn’t call Dean out on it. “If your parents do
get divorced - and I don’t think they will - it won’t be your fault, Dean. Any problems with their marriage are their own, you aren’t responsible for them.”

Dean shakes his head. “That’s real easy for you to say, Cas, but if I hadn’t done this, they wouldn’t be having this fight to begin with.”

“Even so—”

“Yeah, even so, I think I know how to fix this.” It’s something Dean has thought about off and on for a while, but never with any seriousness until now. He’s never had good reason to consider it seriously, other than just a general itch to escape.

Castiel stares at him, a wary look on his face. “What are you thinking?”

Dean wipes the remaining tears off his face with the back of his hand. He sits up straighter, and takes a deep breath. “If I wasn’t here, they wouldn’t have this problem anymore.”

Castiel tilts his head, eyes narrowed. “Dean, what are you saying?”

“I could go away. Not to military school, because fuck that, I’m not my dad, and I’m not going to do follow orders. But I could go off on my own.”

“And do what?” Castiel asks.

“I dunno, find a job somewhere. Get a place of my own.” Dean shrugs. “I’ve got some money saved up from my job with Rufus, so I’ve got enough to get away, I think.”

Castiel stares at him, a look of concern on his face. “But Dean, you haven’t even graduated high school yet.”

“So? I’ll be eighteen in a few weeks. That’s a legal adult. I can find a way to get by.” The more Dean says the words, the more he knows he has to do this. It’s the only solution to this clusterfuck he’s gotten himself into. But maybe he can make the situation better. “You could come with me.”

“What?!”

Dean grabs Castiel’s hands, leaning forward to catch his gaze with his eyes. “Cas, this is it. We could finally get away. We won’t have to do anything we don’t want to do, won’t be guil ted into doing what our dads want us to do, and—”

“Dean, I can’t just up and run away,” Castiel throws Dean’s hands down, and pushes off the bed, turning his back on him. “I have responsibilities here, and school, and—”

Dean grabs Castiel’s arm, twisting him so that he can look at him face to face. “But you don’t have to do those things! Cas, we could leave everything behind here and start fresh. We won’t have anybody forcing us to do what they want! We’re a team, right?”

“But I want to go to college, Dean! I want to graduate high school!”

Dean stares at his friend, eyes searching Castiel’s face for a lie that’s not there. “So, you do want to go to med school then?” His chest feels tight, like there’s a fucking semi sitting on it.
Castiel stares at Dean, mouth opening and closing, before he finally shakes his head and stares down at the floor. “I don’t know what I want. But I do know that I want to go to college, get a degree in something.”

Dean can feel the tears start to well up in his eyes again, but fuck it if he’s going to let Castiel see how much his words hurt. He turns his back on his friend, wiping away the tears as discreetly as he can. “So you figured all this out on your own? Were you ever planning on telling me, or was I just going to wake up one day after graduation, and find a Dear John letter in the treehouse?”

He can hear Castiel sigh behind him and move closer, but when fingers grab the sleeve of his shirt, Dean yanks his arm away.

“Dean, I hadn’t said anything because I didn’t want you to worry, but I was factoring you in my decision,” Castiel says, and then his voice drops to a whisper as he adds, “I always think of you first.”

Dean clears his throat and turns around to meet Castiel’s eyes with a cold gaze. “Yeah, well, you coulda fooled me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dean laughs bitterly. “What the hell does it sound like? I feel like most of the time I never know where I stand with you.” Dean watches Castiel’s face as he spews his words, feeling like the lid on all his insecurities has busted open, finally. “You always keep yourself so closed off. For all I know, you’re just biding your time with me, looking for some cheap thrills until you can move on to bigger and better things at college.”

Castiel’s face drains of all color as Dean’s words slice into him. “How could you ever think that?” he protests. “I gave up almost everything for you, to be near you.”

“Yeah, like what? Your virginity?” Dean snarls. “Newsflash, Cas, I gave mine up to you, too. And look where it’s got us.”

Castiel shakes his head, narrowing his eyes as he stares back at Dean. “You’re the reason I changed schools. Theonly reason I did it was because I missed you.”

Dean can feel his stomach clenching at Castiel’s words. A part of him has always hoped he was the reason for Castiel’s transfer, but at the same time that much devotion terrifies him. He doesn’t deserve that. So he lashes out, tries to push Castiel away because as much as he wants him, Dean knows Castiel deserves better. “Oh, how selfless of you, to lower yourself to the level of us blue-collar heathens. Hope you haven’t gotten your hands too dirty during your fall.”

Castiel’s face scrunches up with confusion. “It wasn’t selfless, Dean. It was the most selfish thing I’ve ever done. I did it because I needed you.” He pauses for a moment. “I still need you.”

Dean can’t stand to hear the words because he doesn’t want to get his hopes up anymore. Castiel has made his choice, and it’s obviously not Dean. “Yeah, well, I’m sure that’ll once you’re off and having fun at college.”

Castiel turns his back on Dean, staring at the wall for several beats before huffing. “So, are you suddenly not ashamed of our relationship anymore?”
It’s a one-eighty that has Dean on his back foot. “What the hell are you talking about?”

When Castiel turns around to face Dean again, the hurt on his face has been replaced with anger. “I’m not stupid, Dean. I’ve known all along that you were ashamed of what was happening between us, and were too afraid for anyone else to find out.”

His anger suddenly deflating, Dean bites his lip. “I’m not ashamed, Cas,” he replies, quietly.

“But what is it? Because the way we sneak around sure as hell feels like shame to me.”

Dean runs his fingers through his hair, gritting his teeth. “Cas…you know how my dad is. He’s ex-military. Even worse, he’s ex-Marines. He has this idea of what being a man is supposed to be like, and…I know if he found out about me, he’d never be able to accept it.”

Castiel stares at Dean, face stony. “And what about everybody at school?”

“Dude, you’re not blind, you know how high school is! I mean, if people found out, then fine, I’d deal with it, but it’s just easier if they don’t know.” Dean watches Castiel’s face, trying to figure out what his friend is thinking. “Cas, have I ever made you feel like a dirty little secret? Like I’m ashamed of you?”

Castiel wraps his arms around his chest, shaking his head. “No, you haven’t.” He steps closer, moving into Dean’s space. “But you wanting to run away like this? That makes me feel like you’re ashamed.”

Dean had felt that familiar pull to move closer to Castiel, but when he hears these last words he pulls back. “I’m not running away!”

Castiel lets loose an irritated breath. “That’s exactly what you’re doing. You don’t want to deal with everything that’s going on, so you think the best option for everyone is you running away.”

Dean stares at him, clenching his fists at his sides to keep from swinging a punch. “You know what? Screw this. I’m out of here.”

He grabs his jacket and turns to go, but Castiel steps in front of him, blocking his way. “Cas, I can’t…I can’t look at you now, okay?” Dean moves around him and opens the door to go, but Castiel pushes him away and slams the door shut.

“Dean, please, let’s just – look, I don’t want you to leave here mad. I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry I haven’t been vocal enough with how I feel about you, and I should have told you about me visiting college campuses a long time ago, I should have included you in on what I was thinking. I get that now, okay? Please?” Castiel grabs Dean’s face between his hands, thumb running across his cheek, and forces Dean to look at him.

They stare at each other, tears streaming down their faces, until Dean forces himself to relax, grabbing onto Castiel’s waist and pulling him close. “Yeah, okay, Cas. I get it.” He closes the distance between them, placing a sweet, soft kiss on Castiel’s lips. He chokes back the sob deep in his chest, kisses each of Castiel’s closed lids, and wipes the tears off his cheeks. “We’re good, but I
gotta go, okay? Don’t want my parents finding out I’m gone.”

Castiel wraps his arms around Dean’s waist, hugging him tightly before nodding and letting him go. “Okay,” he whispers, giving Dean a small smile before kissing him one last time. “We’ll talk more about this tomorrow, right? I’ll come over to your house and we can see each other tomorrow, okay?”

Dean forces himself to smile. “Sure, Cas. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Castiel follows him downstairs to the front door, and watches as Dean climbs onto Sam’s bike.

The image of Castiel standing on his front porch, arms wrapped around himself to ward off the chill, is what Dean keeps remembering as he packs up his things that night, sneaks out of the house, and drives away without looking back.

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Chapter 9

And my old friends, I can remember when
You cut your hair
We never saw you again
Now the cities we live in
Could be distant stars
And I search for you
In every passing car

~Arcade Fire, “Suburban War”

Dean is surprised how easy it is to pack up his things and sneak away under cover of darkness. Easy in the sense of logistics, as his parents and Sammy both close their doors once they go to bed, and seem dead to the world; and easy in the sense of leaving everything he’s ever loved behind.

It’s easier to leave when you remind yourself that everyone is better off without you around.

He finds the keys to his motorcycle easily, and walks her down the street and away from the house before starting her up. Once he reaches the edge of town he stops, staring up at the street signs telling him where he’s going. He’s glad someone knows, because he sure as hell doesn’t.

He rides south and east for a couple days, stopping long enough to rent a room at the cheapest motels he can find, because even if he’s got some cash, it’s not enough to spend it carelessly. He didn’t take his cell phone with him because he doesn’t want anyone to be able to trace his whereabouts, so the one phone call he makes back home is from a pay phone. Dean isn’t sure which is more surprising to him - the fact that pay phones still exist, or the fact that when he makes the call he finally gets a bit of good news.

“Rufus? Hey, this is Dean,” he says, trying his best to block off the chill of the wind through the door of the booth. He’s stopped at a gas station just outside of Memphis, and he doesn’t really know why he’s calling Rufus, other than needing to hear a familiar voice.

“Boy, is that you? You’ve got all your family in a tizzy over here!” Rufus yells down the phone line. “You need to git your scrawny ass back home before they call out the entire state of Kansas.”

Dean can’t help but smile when he hears Rufus’s gruff, pissed-off voice. “I can’t do that, man.”

“Don’t you man me, son,” Rufus chides. “What the hell you think you’re doing running away like this?”

Dean sighs, staring out at the bare branches of the trees in front of the gas station. He wishes it would warm up some, but he guesses he should just be grateful it’s not snowing. “I got into some bad trouble, and I felt like it was just better for everybody if I got away for a while.”

“Son, that is some of the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard, and I’m old and been around enough to hear a shit ton of stupid shit,” Rufus grumbles. “Now since you’re a spoiled rotten fool, maybe you’ve been too spoiled and rotten to realize when you’ve got a good thing. But Dean, you’ve got a
“Rufus, I can’t go back,” Dean says. “Not right now.”

He hears Rufus exhale across the line, the man’s voice crackling with static as he curses under his breath. “Okay, then. What do you need from me?”

Dean bites back a sob, not realizing how much he was needing to hear someone say they want to help. “Do you know of any places around Tennessee that might be hiring? Or have any suggestions about places I can go? I’ll be running out of money soon.”

He listens to the white noise on the line, trying not to think of what may have caused the crustiness on the phone’s receiver. Rufus curses for a few seconds before replying. “Hell, son. I might know of somebody near Chattanooga, if he’s still there or hasn’t kicked the bucket yet. I ain’t talked to him since last I saw him about fifteen years ago.” He sighs before continuing. “Can you make it there, or you need me to wire you some cash?”

Dean assures him that he can find a way to get to Chattanooga, and he will. Even if he has to figure out some not-so-savory ways to get more money, he’ll get there. He agrees to give Rufus another call in a day or so to see if he’s able to get in touch with his friend, and begs Rufus not to tell anyone where he is. The old man isn’t happy about it, but when Dean agrees to let him inform them that he called and is okay, he relents. When Dean hangs up, he presses his forehead against the phone and closes his eyes.

Not for the first time, he’s tempted to turn around and go back to Lawrence. As much as he’s been wanting to hit the road and escape, it was never a part of his dreams to do it like this. Running away all alone, cutting himself off from everyone he’s ever cared about…the wrongness of it all has him feeling nauseated.

As he pushes out of the booth, he reminds himself that it’s the best thing for everyone. His presence was only making his parents fight, and he was holding Castiel back. He wonders if Castiel has stayed with him so long out of a sense of obligation to him, or if he just couldn’t bring himself to let go yet. Either way, it doesn’t matter anymore. Now that he’s cut the ties, they can both move on with their lives.

He considers finding a motel to hole up in until tomorrow instead of driving east, but he figures he might as well get back on the road sooner rather than later. He’ll be heading east whether Rufus’s connection pans out or not, and he doesn’t much feel like being stationary right now.

After consulting his map, Dean climbs back on his bike and moves on. As much as he’d prefer to take the interstates to save money on gas, with the cold temperatures, he’s having to stick to the slower back roads. Even wearing a few layers and gloves, it’s just too frigid to move at the speeds of the main highways. He is enjoying the glimpses of Americana the backroads afford him, though; it’s been the one bright spot of this whole experience, so far.

He gets as far as Lawrenceburg before having to find a place to dig in for the night. He wishes he had a car instead of his motorcycle. He could save a hell of a lot of money by sleeping in a backseat instead of having to rent a room. If it wasn’t so damp and chilly he’d try roughing it in some woods, but he’s not that desperate yet.

The room he gets is about as depressing as every other room he’s stayed in, so far. He knows he
should be glad that the carpet and bedspread are both a shit-shade of brown, because he sure as hell doesn’t want to know how much dirt and stains are on either one of them, but he still hates the dreariness of it all. The decor does nothing to help with his feeling of isolation, so he tries to ignore the loneliness by jumping straight in the shower, turning the water temperature up as high as he can stand it, choosing not to notice the mildew and scum on the bathroom tiles.

His sleep is uneasy that night, images of Castiel reaching and yelling for him as he drives away haunting his dreams. He wakes a little after four am, drenched in a cold sweat, but remains in bed until daylight, trying his damnedest to rid himself of the feeling that he’s abandoned his best friend.

In the brightness of the morning, it’s easier to remember Dr. Novak’s words, and to remind himself of all the times he questioned the depth of Castiel’s feelings for him.

And so Dean moves on.

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Within a couple hours of leaving Lawrenceburg, Dean hits Winchester, Tennessee, and he almost considers trying to stay there, if for no other reason than how cool it is to share a name with the town you’re living in. And as he drives around, he kind of likes the place, too. It’s got a lot of small town, Southern charm to it, and the lakes and creeks around it are beautiful and filled to the brim with bass, or so the old man at the diner he stops at for lunch tells him.

But a town this small is likely a close-knit community, and the last thing Dean needs right now is to feel like even more of an outsider. And one look at the classifieds tells him the likelihood of finding a job quickly is close to none.

He stops off at a park next to Tims Ford lake, sits on the edge of a pier while eating a soggy slice of gas station pie, and stares out at the calm water. This lake is gorgeous, but the colors are all wrong; instead of golden light and deep green waters, it’s gray and gloomy and dark. He can’t keep his eyes from darting to the empty space next to him on the pier, and he wonders what Castiel is doing right now.

He climbs back on his motorcycle and continues east.

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The drive between Winchester and Chattanooga becomes hillier and more treacherous, but Dean can’t complain because the terrain is beautiful. It’s a nice change from the general flatness of Kansas, and he wonders how pretty this area must be in other seasons.

He finds a motel just before sundown, stopping off at a McDonald’s nearby to get something cheap to eat. As much as he loves junk food, he’s already tired of having to get the cheap stuff, and missing his mom’s cooking something fierce. He calls Rufus collect after he’s eaten and showered, eyes welling up when he hears the relief in the man’s voice.

“Dean, I was beginning to worry,” Rufus tells him.

Dean settles back against the headboard of the lumpy bed. “Sorry, sir. I was wanting to wait until I got to Chattanooga to call.”
“So you made it there just fine?”

“Yes, sir,” Dean says. “It’s pretty here, but cold.” He keeps his mouth shut on how lonely it is, too, because he knows what Rufus’s answer will be to that.

Rufus clears his throat. “So I got in touch with my friend. He says he’s retired now, but his daughter took over the business, and he’ll put in a word for you, if you wanna stop by there Monday.”

Dean leans his head back against the bed frame and closes his eyes. “Yeah, that’ll work. What kind of business is it?”

“She’s a carpenter, just like me. Business is pretty good for her, too. Shit knows she’s got more business than I ever did.”

And that…that’s some of the best news Dean’s gotten in a long time. He didn’t dare hope to get a job doing something he knows and actually likes. “Wow, Rufus. That’s awesome. Are they…do they even need anybody right now?”

Rufus chuckles. “Yeah, Art said his daughter’s been griping for months about an apprentice she’s got, s’been wanting to get rid of him but couldn’t afford to be one man down. I told him what a quick learner you are, and you’re not a complete waste of space.”

Dean struggles and fails to hide the emotion in his voice. “Thanks, Rufus. This means…it means a lot, sir.”

There’s a long sigh across the line, and Rufus doesn’t say anything for several moments. “I spoke to your parents.”

Dean sucks in a breath. “You didn’t tell them where I am, did you?”

“I promised you I wouldn’t, so I didn’t,” the old man grumbles. “But son, there’s a world of hurt going on in your family right now. I don’t know everything that’s going on with you, and I don’t wanna know. But you should call them.”

Dean bites his lip, mulling over the words. “I just need some time. I think it’s best for everybody if I’m not around for a while.”

“Shit, boy. If you really believe that, you’re stupider than I thought.”

“I’m sorry, I just can’t right now,” Dean sighs. “If you talk to them again, will you just…will you tell them I’m sorry, and I’m okay?”

“I think you’re the one who should be telling them that, but yeah, I will.”

It’s so very tempting for Dean to ask Rufus to get a message to Castiel for him, as well. It wouldn’t even be a difficult task for the man. He could just tell Missouri, and she’d tell Cas.

But he doesn’t ask.
Dean stays in his motel room and watches a lot of basic cable crap on the antiquated TV for the next couple days, biding his time until Monday. He wants to go out and drive around to check out the town, but he can’t afford to waste gas, so he lays low.

He wakes up early Monday morning, so nervous about the job that he steals three different maps from the lobby of the motel just to make sure he’s got it mapped out correctly. The workshop is located in an art district near downtown, and from what Dean can tell, it looks like a decent neighborhood. It’s probably going to be at least a half-hour drive from the motel, depending on traffic, so he decides to leave about an hour before Rufus told him to show up.

He’s screwed as far as nice clothes to wear for the interview, given he didn’t have much room in his duffel to pack anything resembling appropriate; even if he had, it’d be wrinkled to hell by now. He chooses his nicest pair of jeans, buttoning up and tucking in a flannel shirt in the hopes that it’ll be suitable enough.

He arrives about twenty minutes early, so he uses that extra time to drive around the area. It really is a cool part of town, from the looks of it, although maybe a bit too hippyish for his own tastes. What houses and apartments he sees are way too expensive for his blood, so if he gets this job he imagines there won’t be any walks to work in his future.

When he steps into Riverbend Carpentry and Studios, he’s a bit surprised at what he finds. It isn’t a cramped, dusty workshop, like what Rufus has, even though from the outside it looks like nothing more than a warehouse. Instead, it’s got what looks to be a gallery to the left, with ornate, deep mahogany shelves and cabinets containing all sorts of wooden art pieces and collectibles, along with metal structures in strange designs. To the right of the entrance is some sort of reception desk or sales counter, with a really attractive woman sitting behind it, though she looks as if she’d be more comfortable sitting on a Harley and dressed up in leather chaps instead.

“Well, hello, sugar,” the woman drawls, giving him a once over. And then a twice over. “Are you my Christmas present come early? I hope not too early.”

Dean gulps. This is so totally not what he’d been expecting. Grizzled men with pants showing their ass cracks, that’s what he’d been expecting. “Uh, I’m here about a job interview?” His voice is so high-pitched from nerves he wouldn’t be surprised if they assumed he was a eunuch.

“If I get to look at you every day, then it must be Christmas and my birthday all rolled up into one!” The woman steps out from behind the counter, extending a tattoo-covered arm to Dean. “I’m Pamela,” she purrs.

Dean just barely remembers not to wipe his palm against his jeans before extending his hand. “Dean Winchester,” he smiles, albeit still freaked as hell by the way Pamela is eyeing him like a field mouse to her fox. “Is, uh, Ms. Mills around?”

The woman grabs his hand and begins pulling him behind the counter and through the door to the back. “Jody! We’ve got a live one here!”

The back of the warehouse is much more of what Dean had been expecting from a carpenter’s workshop. The floor is a polished concrete, like the front lobby and gallery, but there’s sawdust and shavings all over the place. The workshop is huge, compared to what Dean is used to; there must be close to ten work benches, not including the large tables with blueprints spread out across them. There’s so many stacks and shelves with equipment and tools that Dean can’t keep count, and
when he gets a glimpse of the wood that they’ve got stocked towards the back he practically starts drooling.

A woman with short, brunette hair approaches him, wearing jeans and a Ramones t-shirt. “Are you Rufus’s guy?” she asks, holding a hand out to shake.

He grabs her hand firmly, noticing the callouses he finds there. He can appreciate a boss who gets in the thick of things. “Yes, ma’am. Dean Winchester.”

She snorts. “I appreciate the manners, but hearing ma’am makes me feel like a school marm.” She smiles at him then, and her eyes light up with a warmth that reminds Dean achingly of his mother. “You can call me Jody.”

She walks him around the workshop, pointing out tools here and there to see if he’s familiar with them. She seems pleased with what knowledge Dean has, and once again, he’s grateful to Rufus for all that he showed him last summer, tough old fart that he is. Jody explains the presence of the gallery at the front of the building; she and a few of the other carpenters like to play around and make sculptures and odd knick knacks, and once they realized there was a market for it, especially in this area of town, she decided to open up a room to start selling them. Pamela works part time at the front desk to deal with any customers in exchange for Jody letting her sell the metal designs that she welds in the workshop.

“You do a lot of welding here, too?” Dean asks, wondering if he could be trained in that, as well.

Jody shrugs. “Some of our designs require metal, so yeah, it’s a lot less hassle for us to take care of it in-house instead of having to wait and pay a welder for it.”

They finish up the tour in a break room, and Jody asks a couple of the guys that are sitting down drinking coffee to leave them alone so they can finish up their interview.

“So, Dean, can I ask what your deal is? I don’t want to pry, but you seem awfully young, and to have you suddenly just show up on my doorstep…well, you can’t blame an employer for being wary.”

Dean tries not to fidget under her gaze, and decides to trust her enough to tell her at least part of the truth. “Uh, I got into a bit of trouble. With the law.” Jody’s eyes narrow suspiciously, so he rushes to continue explaining himself. “It wasn’t a big deal, it was just a stupid mistake. I got caught smoking a joint. They dropped the charges since it was my first time, but I uh, things weren’t great at home after that, so I thought it’d be best if I left.”

He meets her gaze, and she watches him for several moments before taking a deep breath. “How old are you? Are you legal?”

He clears his throat. “I turn eighteen in about a month.”

She leans against the worktable behind her, staring down at the floor, deep in thought. Dean shoves his hands in his pockets and waits, praying to god or whoever the fuck is listening to please let her say yes. If she says no, he doesn’t think he can do this anymore, doesn’t think he can keep from turning around and driving back to Lawrence. He’s lonely, and he’s scared, and he needs a break, just one fucking break, please.

Jody raises her head and looks at him. “Okay. You’re hired.”
When Jody figures out that Dean has nowhere to go for Christmas, she pretty much demands that he come to her house for the holiday, and laughingly threatens to make him scrub the bathrooms and toilets on his hands and knees with a toothbrush if he declines. Since the men’s bathroom doesn’t look like it’s been cleaned since Whitesnake was topping the charts, Dean agrees quickly to attend.

Dean really didn’t want to go. He’d been studiously ignoring the impending holiday, and had planned to camp out in his motel room for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, watching holiday movies and eating beef jerky and stale, store-bought pie. But he felt obligated to go, not wanting to make any waves this early in his employment, so he sucked it up and agreed. On Christmas Eve, as he’s bundled up under the musty, threadbare bedspread and watching *It’s A Wonderful Life*, he starts to wish he’d buckled and agreed to spend Christmas Eve with her family as well. He hadn’t realized just how lonely he could be until it hits him all at once like a punch to the chest, robbing him of his breath, and making him curl into a ball under the covers.

That night is the first time since he was a kid that he’s cried himself to sleep.

The following morning he tries to sleep late, but the bright sunshine peeking through the cheap drapes has him up early. Jody told him just to show up around noon, and when he’d asked if he should bring anything she’d laughed and said “You just bring your appetite and let me worry about everything else.”

She lives about ten minutes away from the shop, and with the lack of Christmas morning traffic it doesn’t take Dean long to get there at all. When he rides up, he recognizes a few of the cars parked on the street out front, and wonders if this is more of a work party instead of family. Once inside, he only sees a handful of people that he’s not met before, and wonders if they’re all that Jody has of family around here. It seems that a lot of strays like Dean end up at Jody’s home for the holidays.

He can feel his face flush when everybody greets him simultaneously as he’s let inside, and Jody scurries out of the kitchen long enough to make introductions. “Dean, you know everybody from the shop, but let me introduce you to my dad, Art.”

An older man with a receding hairline steps up and holds a hand out. “I’ve heard a lot of good things about you, Dean. Surprisingly enough, even Rufus said some nice stuff.”

Dean laughs awkwardly at his joke, knowing that’s what’s expected. “It’s nice to meet you, sir. And thank you for putting in a good word with my boss.” He gives Jody a hesitant smile.

They exchange a few more pleasantries before Jody wanders back to the kitchen, and her father takes a seat with the other guys in the den to watch football. Dean stands in the hallway between the dining room and den, unsure of where to go and wanting for all the world to run out the door and leave. He’s never spent a Christmas away from his family, and has never felt so out of place before. Just as he’s about to go tell Jody he’s not feeling good and try to get out of here, he feels a tug on his sleeve. When he glances down, he finds wide brown eyes staring up at him.

“My mom said to come and see if you wanted anything to drink,” the little boy whispers.
Dean has to think for a second about who this kid’s mom is, until he realizes it must be Jody. He’s surprised because this is the first he’s heard she has a kid. “Uh, sure. What do you have?”

“There’s soda and orange pop, and milk and chocolate milk, and apple juice and sweet tea,” the boy lists. “And grownup drinks too, but mom said you’re not old enough for that.”

Oh, what Dean would give to have a beer to take the edge off right now. But he smiles down at the kid and says, “I’ll take some sweet tea, if that’s okay.”

The boy turns and disappears into the kitchen, stepping back out a minute later carrying a plastic cup with Bugs Bunny on it, which he carefully hands to Dean. “Do you play Mario Kart?” the boy asks solemnly.

“Sure. What self-respecting guy doesn’t play Mario Kart?”

And that’s how Dean ends up spending most of Christmas day hanging out with Jody’s son, Owen. He learns that Owen is six years old, and that he hates radishes more than anything in this world, except for zombies. Dean doesn’t know if it makes him feel better or worse that the kid reminds him so much of Sammy. It’s comforting to have someone next to him that reminds him of home, someone who isn’t staring at him and wondering what his deal is. But those moments when he looks over at Owen and expects to see his brother instead are like a cold knife to the heart.

They take a break to eat the Christmas meal with everyone else in the house, but as soon as Dean’s eaten his last bite of sweet potato pie, Owen is pulling on his hand and dragging him back into the rec room. After another hour or so, the full belly and excitement from his new Nintendo begins to take its toll on the kid, and he ends up sprawling out on the floor and falling asleep. Dean plays the game by himself for a while, but starts eyeing the floor next to him when he can’t stop yawning. He wonders if maybe he should say his goodbyes and get back to the motel room. He’s not heard much talking or laughter through the rest of the house for some time, and when he gets up to go to the bathroom, he realizes that everyone else has left, and Jody is busy cleaning up the kitchen.

“Uh, wow, I didn’t realize everybody else had gone home,” Dean says as he steps into the kitchen. “Do you need any help with the cleanup?”

Jody leans back against the the counter, wiping a dish dry. “Nope, Pamela and Marcie helped with most of it. I’m just finishing it up.” She watches Dean fidget for a second, and smiles. “I hope Owen didn’t annoy you too much?”

Dean shakes his head. “Nah, we had fun. He’s a good kid.”

She chuckles, turning around to set the plate up in the open cabinet. “He can be a little shit sometimes, but I wouldn’t trade him for anything.” She wipes the counter with a wet rag as she continues. “His dad left us a little over a year ago, and didn’t look back. So, he’s had a hard time of it, you know?”

Dean nods, staring down at his shoes. “I guess you probably haven’t had it too easy, either.” He tries not to think of those he left behind just a couple weeks ago, tries not to wonder what kind of Christmas they have had, but it’s impossible not to feel guilty. One more thing he’s probably ruined for his family.

“Yeah, it wasn’t a picnic at first, but I’m getting over it,” Jody says, shrugging. “He didn’t care
enough about us to stay when things got hard, so it’s better for us in the long run that he’s not here.”

“Maybe he knew you’d be better off without him,” Dean says, not able to hold back the words. Something in what she says makes Dean feel defensive, even though he knows deep down that she wasn’t talking about him or his situation. “Maybe he didn’t want to go, but he knew he was no good for you.”

Jody’s eyes narrow as she looks at him. “Trust me, Dean, you didn’t know my husband. Everything about what he did was selfish.”

Dean could kick himself for saying what he did. He had no right to stick his nose in Jody’s business. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…I just, I’m really sorry, okay?” He meets her gaze but looks away quickly, and starts backing out of the kitchen. “You’re right, I have no idea what I’m talking about. I should go. It’s getting late anyways, and—”

“Dean, no, wait a second, okay?” Jody reaches out to grab his arm, anchoring him. “I’m sorry if it seemed like I was snapping at you. That wasn’t my intention at all.” She waits until he meets her eyes again before continuing. “I can still be pretty snippy when it comes to talking about that asshole, and sometimes I take it out on the wrong people.”

Dean nods and takes a deep breath. “That’s okay. It’s understandable.” He looks to the window and notices that the sun is setting. It’s even later than he’d thought. “I really should probably get going though.”

He fidgets as he feels Jody watching him closely. “Can I ask you something personal?”

“Uh, you can ask, but I dunno if I’ll answer,” he mutters, worried. He’s not comfortable talking about himself on the best of days, and this is definitely not one of those.

“Where are you living right now?”

It’s not at all what he was expecting to hear, and Dean answers before he can stop himself. “A motel.” He avoids her stare, watches his fingers as he plays with a stray thread on the hem of his shirt. He’s gonna have to go to the laundromat again this weekend, if he can scrounge up enough change.

She sighs. “Yeah, I figured. Especially after what all Rufus told my dad.”

Dean’s head snaps up at her words. “He shouldn’t be telling my business to everybody. It’s personal.”

“My dad wanted to know what your story was. Wanted to make sure he didn’t expose his daughter and her business to some violent, unhinged psycho,” Jody replies, rolling her eyes. “He pisses me off when he gets all my daughter this and my daughter that, but he’s got a point, and I wasn’t wanting to take that risk, either.” She chews on her lip for a minute before continuing. “You should call your family, you know.”

Dean scoffs. “You don’t know anything about what’s going on with me and my family.”

“I know you miss them, it’d be plain as day even if I was blind,” she retorts, crossing her arms across her chest. “And I know they miss you. Rufus said they’re good people, but I knew that
without being told. I could tell it just by talking to you.”

Dean clenches his jaw, willing his eyes not to well up with tears. “I know it’s probably hard for them right now, but it’s the best thing. For all of us.”

Jody snorts, turning around to open the drain on the sink. “Yeah, if you believe that, I’ve got some land to sell you in the Everglades.” She faces him again, clearing her throat as if to make an announcement. “Well, if you’re not going to call your family, then I’m gonna have to let my mama bear instincts take over, and insist that you stay here tonight.”

Dean sucks in a breath in surprise. “What? No, I can’t, I—”

“You can, and you will. I’m not allowing you to drive back to some depressing, cheap motel all alone on Christmas night. I’ve got two extra bedrooms for you to choose from, and you’ll even have your own bathroom.” She pauses long enough to smile at him and lay a hand on his shoulder. “Besides, someone’s going to have to eat some of these leftovers for supper tonight, and if it’s left up to me they’ll need to find some Oompa-Loompas to roll me out of the house.”

“But I don’t have anything to sleep in, or a toothbrush or clothes for work tomorrow….” Dean lets his words drift, because as much as he doesn’t want to be somebody’s charity case, the thought of staying in a home tonight, with nice people and home cooking, it’s tempting.

Jody walks into the hallway, motioning for Dean to follow. “I have pajamas that belonged to my husband, we always have spare toothbrushes in the house because of Owen’s friends sleeping over, and the shop’s not opening until noon, so you’ll have plenty of time to drive back to the motel to change.” She opens a hallway closet, pulling out towels and a toothbrush still in its packaging. “You have no excuse not to stay, other than being weirded out that your new lady boss is making you spend the night with her, and even that’s not gonna get you out of this.”

“I don’t know what to say,” Dean mutters, feeling self-conscious as he can feel his face flushing.

“You say, ‘Thanks, Jody,’ and ‘Sure, I’ll eat the rest of the casseroles and pie so that you don’t have to jog to Siberia to work it off, Jody.’ How does that sound?”

Dean takes a deep breath, letting himself relax enough to smile. It’s a smile of relief and gratitude, and the first genuine smile he’s made in what feels like months. “Thanks, Jody. And where’s all this food you’re promising me?”

“Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” She slaps him affectionately on the back before leaning in to add, “Just stay away from the mac and cheese because Owen will have a meltdown the size of Texas if it gets eaten.”

Jody shows Dean the two spare bedrooms, and he chooses the one that reminds him the most of his room back in Lawrence. After the past couple weeks in dingy motel rooms, it looks almost like a little piece of heaven. Before he can sit down on the bed, Jody returns with flannel pajamas, encouraging him to change and get comfy for the evening. “We like to be slugs Christmas evening, so we’ll probably bore you to death with watching TV and Owen playing his games once he wakes back up.”

Dean shakes his head, smiling sadly as he remembers doing much of the same growing up in his family. “Nah, that’s what we always do - did - too.”
“Okay, I’ll leave you to it, then,” she continues. “You’re more than welcome to come out and hang with us, I’m sure Owen would love it. Or you can take a nap or take it easy alone in here. Just give me a holler if you need anything.”

Dean assures her that he will, and says he’ll probably come out to spend some time with them in a bit. He just wants to lie down and get his bearings for a few minutes, though he doesn’t say as much to her. When she leaves, he closes the door and crawls under the covers of the bed, breathing in the scent of fresh, clean cotton. It’s amazing the kinds of things you take for granted; he’d never known how awesome clean, nice sheets were until he’d stayed in motels for weeks, wondering when was the last time anything was cleaned properly, if ever.

He burrows into his pillow and closes his eyes. If he were home right now, he’d probably be curled up in front of the TV, hanging with Sammy and Castiel, and talking about how awesome their Christmas had been. Since they’d started high school, Castiel hadn’t spent Christmas night with them, but when they were younger it had been a tradition. They’d made plans to renew the tradition this year, and Dean had even bought his friend a a new sketchpad and charcoal as a present.

Castiel. For the first time in days, Dean allows himself to actually think about his friend, and it feels like he’s poking through a scab that covers a hole where his heart should be. He doesn’t know how to be without Castiel in his life. Over the years, Cas has woven himself so deeply into Dean’s world, into the very fabric of his being, that Dean feels as if he’s missing a limb. That’s the only way he can think to describe such a profound feeling of loss.

Castiel’s unflinching, constant, steady presence acted as a foundation for Dean, just as surely as his family’s support always did. He calmed Dean, excited him, enraged and enraptured him, could make him feel precious and important and invincible with just a simple look. But even after years of being best friends, there was always that little voice in the back of Dean’s mind that warned him, made him wonder if Castiel would abandon him once he realized he was meant for better things. When they were younger, he didn’t pay much attention to that little voice; he just hoped that maybe Castiel would choose him over the life his father wanted him to have. But once their relationship became physical, those doubts became too loud, at times, especially given that Castiel wasn’t one to share his feelings. Dean tried reminding himself that he wasn’t exactly the share-and-care type of guy either, but that didn’t erase his need to hear Castiel reveal the true depth of his feelings for Dean. And overhearing Dr. Novak give voice to his fear of Castiel abandoning him made Dean realize it was only a matter of time before Castiel chose to move on.

He takes a deep breath, and pushes the covers off of himself. Clearly his mind isn’t going to let him rest, so he decides to take Jody up on her offer of company, leftovers, and bad holiday TV.

On New Year’s Eve, Dean gets another surprise when Jody approaches him on his lunch break.

“Are you looking for a place to live?” she asks, sitting down across the table from him.

“Well, since my dream isn’t to live at the Motel 6 for the rest of my life, yeah, I guess so,” he replies. The longer he works here, the more comfortable he’s getting in sharing his snark with everyone else. It’s a good thing for him that Jody and everyone else can give just as good as they
She snorts, reaching across the table to steal a couple of his fries. “Okay, I have a proposal for you.” She takes a sip of her coffee and winces. Pamela makes the coffee strong enough to put hair on a trucker’s back. “I have a place above my garage that I paid a couple friends of mine to turn into an apartment a few years ago. My mom passed away, and I’d wanted my dad to move in there, but he’s such a stubborn bastard that he refused to leave the house he already has.” She pauses for a moment and stares at him. “What would you say about moving into it?”

Dean immediately sits up straighter. “Um, I don’t know. Are you serious?”

“I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I wasn’t serious,” she scoffs. “Look, it’s not like I need extra income. But, it’d be nice to have someone I know and trust close by, in case anything happens with Owen or something. All of my neighbors are jackasses, so I don’t talk to them any more than I have to.”

“So, does it have a bathroom and stuff? Or would I have to come into the house for that?” Dean can feel the hope rising in his chest, and he tries unsuccessfully to squash it down.

“Yep, it’s got it’s own bathroom, and a little kitchen, too. It’s a tiny place, more like a studio apartment, but it has everything you’d need. I even got cable and phone hooked up.”

“I would pay rent, though, right? And help with other bills,” he adds. “I don’t want this to be a charity case.”

“Oh, well yeah, of course you would pay rent,” Jody agrees. “And it’d be nice if you could help me with some of the other chores around the place that I hate doing. Like cleaning the gutters, ugh I loathe doing that.”

Dean eyes her closely. “So is the extra money and help the only reason you’re offering?”

Jody picks at a napkin on the table, tearing it apart piece by tiny piece. “Yes. Well, no, not really.” She exhales and looks up at him. “I don’t like the thought of you living out of a motel. You’re a good kid, and I just…I know if you were mine, if you were Owen, I’d want someone looking out for him.”

Dean’s pride is telling him to say no. He’s gotten this far with only just some help from Rufus. He can find a place on his own. But every other part of his being is telling him to accept the help when it’s so gracefully and selflessly offered, even if it feels too good to be true.

“You hardly even know me,” he says, uncertainly.

Jody stares at him, unflinching. “I know you’re a hard worker. I know you’re an honest kid who needs a break. And I know you’re lonely, and needing something like a home.”

Dean looks down at his hands. He’s starting to get callouses from the work, and he’s proud of them. He’s learned so much already in the past couple weeks of working here, and he’s got Jody and the other workers promising to teach him about wood sculpting; hell, even Pamela has offered to show him how she welds metal for her sculptures, though he’s still not convinced she’s not trying to get into his pants. He doesn’t really understand how he’s ended up here, when just a few short weeks ago, he’d ridden out of Lawrence with no idea of where he was going or what he was doing.
“When can I move in?” he asks.

Jody grins. “How about tomorrow? Kick off the New Year with a new home.”

Dean nods and smiles, trying to hide how relieved he is.

Maybe he can do this after all.

The apartment above Jody’s garage is more than Dean had been hoping for. She’d already filled it with furniture they’d built in the shop that had been refused by fickle clients or just had never been sold, and the eclectic decorations throughout the apartment makes it feel like more of a home. It’s really just one big open space, with the kitchen open to the rest of the apartment, the only separate room being the bathroom, of course. The layout of it almost reminds Dean of old man Joshua's abandoned house next to the lake, and Dean tries to chase away the resemblance of it as much as he can by decorating his apartment even more, the memory of how lonely Joshua's house looked making him ache.

Dean loves the apartment. It provides just enough privacy to make him feel like it’s his, but not so much that he frequently falls victim to the loneliness and melancholy that is always threatening to consume him. Jody had given Owen strict instructions to not intrude on Dean, and the sweet kid follows her instructions to the letter; Dean finds that more often than not, he’s the one to go searching for Owen’s company, instead of the reverse.

The morning of his birthday, Dean wakes up expecting to hear his mom whispering Wake up, birthday boy in his ear as she’s done for as long as he can remember. He has to take a moment to remind himself of where he is, and he spends the rest of the day smothering the hope that someone from home will call and wish him a happy birthday. He’d made sure no one could find him, so it’s stupid to wish for it now.

At lunch, Jody and the others bring out a birthday cake, and Pamela makes them all sing Happy Birthday to him, the men, admittedly, more grudgingly than both Jody and Pamela. And when each person hands Dean a gift, he has to swallow down the lump in his throat and hide the tears in his eyes because if the guys see him crying they’ll never let him live it down.

When Pamela hands him her gift, he stares at it curiously. It’s some weird, cool-looking thing made out of iron that she says he’s supposed to hang near his door. “It’s a devil’s trap,” she explains, after he eyes it for a few seconds. “It’ll protect your home from evil.”

As weird as it is, Dean is actually kind of touched by it, as well as by the other gifts he gets. Jody buys him pots and pans for his kitchen, and even the other guys give him presents of things he needs, like oil for his motorcycle, and magazines on carpentry. It’s all way more than he’d expected, and it makes him feel welcomed into this makeshift family they have. He thanks everyone, giving Jody and Pamela a hug and a kiss on the cheek, before excusing himself to the bathroom so he can collect himself.

It’s not his family back in Lawrence, but it’s a good start, he tells himself.
He falls into an easy routine of work and home, and he watches a lot of TV and reads a lot of library books those first few months. He even buys himself a notebook and pen, and begins to jot down a few of the stories he used to tell Sam and Castiel when they were kids. It feels weird putting the stories down on paper, and it’s slow-going, at first. But it gets easier, and as he picks apart the memories it becomes a little less painful to think of Castiel, especially remembering how they were as kids.

On occasion, Dean is tempted to go out and find something else to do, to socialize and maybe make some friends. But before he can, he’ll see or hear something that reminds him of home, of Sam, or his parents, or Castiel. He’ll imagine how much they must hate him right now, and instead of venturing out he’ll crawl into bed, and pull the covers up tight around his ears.

As the temperatures get warmer outside and the days become longer, Dean does start to venture out into the world around him. He meets a dude named Ash one afternoon at the gas station down the road from work, when the guy approaches him to tell him he likes his bike. Ash ends up inviting him to a bowling game that night when he hears that Dean is new in town, and he forces himself to go, if for no other reason than he’s tired of sitting in his apartment and feeling sorry for himself.

Ash is just as likely to be partying and getting drunk or stoned as he is to be having deep philosophical discussions or going on and on about one of his many conspiracy theories. Dean decides early on that he won’t be hanging out with the guy when he’s in one of his partying moods, having had enough of that to last him for quite a while. It’s still tempting to get fucked up so he can forget about everything for a few hours, but he’s been burned enough to not want to go that route again anytime soon.

The morning of May second, Dean can’t resist the urge to call home any longer. It’s Sam’s birthday, and he misses the little shit so much that he’s stopped at a pay phone and dialing Sam’s cell number before he even realizes what he’s doing.

“Hello?” Sam’s voice is suspicious, probably because he doesn’t recognize the number. Dean opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. He holds the phone away from his mouth and clears his throat before trying to speak again. “Hey, Sammy.”

There’s silence across the line for several beats. “Dean?” The kid’s voice cracks, and with it, a little piece of Dean’s heart breaks. “Dean, is that you?”

“Yeah, Sammy. It’s me,” he replies, his own voice croaking.

It’s so quiet on the line that Dean begins to wonder if the line is dead or if Sam hung up on him. But then Sam starts speaking in a rush of words. “Dean, where are you? Are you okay? Why won’t you come home? Dude, where are you?!”

Dean smiles, remembering how Sam’s words always get so jumbled when he’s excited. “Hey, Sammy, chill, okay? I’m okay. I’m…I’m safe.” He takes a deep breath. “I was just wanting to wish you a happy birthday. And wanted you to know I was thinking about you.”

“Dean, why did you leave?” Sam asks, voice confused.

Dean sighs, staring out the window of the phone booth. “You know why, I left you that note.”
“Dude, all that note said was, ‘I can’t stay anymore, it’s better if I leave, I’m so sorry.’ That’s not an explanation, Dean,” Sam accuses. His voice has gone from excited and shocked to pissed in about two seconds, but Dean can’t blame him.

Dean exhales slowly, considering just how much he wants to get into with Sam over the phone. “I didn’t wanna go away to that school Dad was talking about, and I didn’t like Mom and Dad fighting with each other over me. It’s just…it’s better this way, Sammy.”

Sam scoffs. “It’s not better, Dean! That’s like the stupidest thing you’ve ever said. Mom and Dad are still freaking out. You need to come home.”

“Are they still fighting?”

“No, but—”

“See? Me leaving did help.” Dean’s relieved to at least find out the fighting has stopped.

“Dean, they wouldn’t have kept fighting forever. They were just upset, and didn’t know what to do. I even heard Dad agree with mom that military school was a bad idea.” Sam gets quiet for a moment before continuing. “He blames himself for you leaving, Dean. He’s…Dad’s really torn up about it. Mom, too.”

Dean squeezes his eyes shut, trying his best to keep them from tearing up, and failing pathetically. “I just needed to get away for a while. I felt like I couldn’t breathe anymore, and I needed some space.”

“But now it’s better, right? Now you can come home?”

Dean grips the phone so tight he can hear the plastic creaking. “No, Sam. Not yet.”

He hears Sam let loose a breath before spitting out, “You’re such a selfish asshole, Dean! You’re not the only one hurting because of this. Did you even consider how you running away was gonna make me feel? Or Cas? You just fucking left us without even looking back. You ran off to have your perfect life wherever the hell you are, and you don’t even care how much we miss you.”

Dean sucks in a breath at the mention of Castiel. “Sammy, that’s not how it is at all. It fucking killed me to leave you guys.”

“You coulda fooled me.”

“How is Cas?” He hates himself for asking and hates even more how his voice shakes when he asks.

Sam doesn’t say anything for several beats. “Not that you have any right to know, because you don’t, but he’s…I think he’s okay. I dunno. You know how he is, he doesn’t really show how he’s feeling too much.”

Dean nods to himself. He didn’t want to hear that Cas was really hurting, but it still burns a little to think maybe Cas wasn’t even bothered enough to show his emotions a bit. “Yeah, that sounds about right.”
“He asked if you left a note for him or anything, but you didn’t, did you?” Sam says. “He called it something, I don’t remember what it was…a deer letter? Does that make sense?”

“A ‘Dear John’ letter?” Dean manages to choke out.

“Yeah, I think that was it. But when I told him I didn’t see anything for him, he just kinda nodded. Did you guys fight, too?”

Dean sighs. “No. Well, yeah, kinda. I don’t wanna talk about it, Sam.”

“You know, he comes and hangs out in the treehouse, sometimes. By himself. Mom saw him one day, and she went out and talked to him.”

It feels like the bottom drops out of Dean’s stomach. “What did they say?”

“I dunno. I asked Mom, and she just said she told Cas he was welcome here any time, and that the treehouse belongs to him just as much as it does you or any of us.”

The pressure behind Dean’s eyes becomes almost unbearable. He needs to get off the phone with Sam before he loses it completely. “Hey uh, I need to be going, Sammy. I’m gonna be late for work.”

“Wait, Dean! You never told me where you are. And is this your phone number?”

“No, I’m calling from a pay phone. I don’t have a phone,” Dean lies. He’s got a landline phone, but he doesn’t want anyone to be able to trace him that easily. He’d given the number to Rufus after making the old man promise not to give it to anyone else. “I’ll call you again soon, Sam. I promise.”

“Dean, please don’t go yet! You should talk to Mom.”

“No, I can’t, not right now. Just…just tell them I’m doing good, okay? I’m safe, and I’ve got a good place to live, and I’ve got a job. I’m sorry, Sammy.”

“Dean, come on!” Sam’s voice has gone from pleading to angry again.

“I’ll talk to you soon.” Dean hangs up before he changes his mind.

He wonders if Sam or anyone else will ever forgive him for everything he’s done.

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Dean keeps himself busy through the summer. After some encouragement from Jody, he checks into getting his GED, and ends up taking some study courses at a local center not far from the workshop. He meets up with his study group two nights a week, and forces himself to study a few hours every weekend.

When he’s not working or studying for his GED, he spends a lot of time reading about woodworking. Jody’s gotten more comfortable with letting him work on his own with smaller
projects, and she’s even given him permission to use any surplus supplies to create his own stuff. What he’s been surprised to discover is that he has more fun making sculptures and creating his own furniture than working on contracted orders. Once he’s got the basics down of how to make a chair or table that actually serves its function, he starts to play around with style and design, and Jody takes notice of his ingenuity.

“Dean, you keep this up, and we’ll be selling your designs faster than my own,” she jokes, giving him a hug when she sees how much Dean beams at her words.

He begins to carve and sand figurines out of the spare bits of wood they have lying around, trying his best to capture some of the creatures he and Castiel made up for their stories when they were kids. It starts out as nothing more than practice for him, getting his hands familiar with handling the equipment and as something to keep his hands busy, but Jody flips when she spies his creations. “Dean, you have to let me sell these in the gallery.”

He can feel his face flushing at her words. “Do you really think people would want to buy them?”

“Are you kidding me?” she rejoices. “People are going to flip their shit over this. They’re creepy, and bizarre, and fantastical. I don’t think I’ve ever seen wood figures like this before. They kind of remind me of Tim Burton but, I don’t know, there’s a warmth to them, too. Maybe because of the wood? Whatever it is, you need to keep doing it.”

And Jody is right. It’s not long before his figurines become the hottest thing in their gallery, and it’s difficult for Dean to find time to make enough to keep from running out. They take pictures of each one so that Dean can keep track of what he’s done, as well as to know what a client is talking about when they say they want another “monster like the one you had in here a few weeks ago.”

Dean has fun making the figurines, and as time wears on he gets more comfortable with it, and is able to make more and more complicated designs. Pamela steps in one day and offers to give Dean more welding lessons, and before the end of the summer, he’s welding iron designs to sell alongside the wooden ones.

He becomes so busy with work and studying for his GED that he barely has time for anything else. And he’s happy with that. Work and studying keep him from thinking too much, from wondering how everyone in Lawrence is doing or wondering if everyone hates him. What spare time he has, he spends it either hanging out with Jody and Owen, or bowling with Ash. Sometimes, he’ll go off on his own; he’ll go to a baseball game of a local minor league team or off to some batting cages to let off some steam. One time, he borrows a fishing pole from Gus at work, and drives west back to Winchester and Tims Ford lake, but it makes him miss Castiel so much that he decides not to go fishing again.

One Friday towards the end of summer, Jody gives Dean the day off work so that he can take his GED exam. He’s nervous about it until he reminds himself that after all the shit he’s been through lately, a stupid test is a piece of cake, and he’s right. He gets his results a few weeks later, and discovers he passed with high marks. Jody and Owen throw him an impromptu pizza party in celebration, and they spend hours playing Mario Kart and listening to a classic rock station.

He takes a shower before bed that night, and thinks of Castiel as he jacks off, breath stuttering as he moans his friend's name. It’s the first time he’s allowed himself to fantasize about Cas since he ran away, and he comes so hard and so fast when he imagines Castiel’s lips around the head of his cock that he’s surprised he doesn’t chip the bathroom tile.
Sometime after two am he wakes in a cold sweat, screaming Castiel’s name. He’d been dreaming that he and Castiel were lying beside the lake, when Castiel suddenly starts coughing and vomiting black stuff. When Dean tries to help him, grabbing him and begging him to stop, Castiel pulls away and stumbles into the lake, and the next thing Dean knows, he’s pulling Castiel’s lifeless body from the water.

Dean slings the bedcovers off and trips into the kitchen, gulping down a glass of water before throwing the glass into the sink. It shatters, and Dean curses to himself, laughing hysterically and rubbing the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand. He returns to bed and curls up into a ball, shivering as he remembers what it felt like for Castiel to slip from his hands.

*I miss you so much,* is his mantra as he tries to keep from falling back to sleep.

The holidays come and go, Dean doing his best to not remember what his life was like just one year ago. Jody once again includes him in with the rest of her holiday plans, and this time he even takes part in the gift exchange. It’s fun for him to actually be able to afford to buy nice presents for others, and he’s grateful he’s able to show Jody and everyone else at least a bit of how much he appreciates everything they’ve done for him.

Dean waits until late Christmas night to call Sam and wish him a Merry Christmas. He knows if he calls any other time, chances are good that their parents will be within earshot. As much as he misses them and wants to talk to them, after all this time he’s unsure of how to take that first step.

“Hello?” Sam answers, and Dean bites back a grin at hearing his voice. His very deep voice, as it seems puberty finally decided to pay his vocal chords a visit.

“Merry Christmas, pipsqueak.”

“Dean! I was wondering if you’d call,” Sam replies. There’s some movement over the phone in the background, and he realizes Sam was moving to close his door when he hears the click of it shutting.

“Yeah, I was really missing you, so I took the chance as soon as I could,” Dean says. “How are you? Did you get a good haul for Christmas?”

“I’m okay. When are you coming home?”

Dean sighs. “Sam, I—”

“No, don’t say it. I don’t want to hear your excuses. Just come home.”

“Sam, look…I will come home. I will. I’m just…I’m waiting for the right time.”

“The right time was six months ago. No, actually, the right time was a year ago. You never should have left, Dean,” Sam says angrily.

“I know you’re pissed at me. But dammit, Sam, what the fuck was the point of me hanging around
just so everyone else could leave me a few months or a few years down the road? Why should I be the one getting left?"

“What are you even talking about?”

Dean is surprised by how pissed he is now. He thought he’d worked past this. “Dad left us when we were kids. You don’t remember it because you were just a baby, but he did, more than once, to go off on his stupid missions. Cas was planning on leaving me to go off to some fancy college and forget all about me. Charlie was planning on going off to school, you’re planning on it, Jo’s planning on it…” he takes a deep breath. “Everyone leaves, Sam. Everyone. So why the fuck couldn’t I be the one to leave first?”

Sam doesn’t say anything for a full minute after Dean shuts up. He’s beginning to think he hung up, but before he can ask if he’s still there, Sam clears his throat. “I can’t believe you think me going off to school, or any of us going off to school, is us leaving you. That’s fucked up, Dean.”

Dean laughs, the taste bitter in his mouth. “Yeah, well I never claimed to be the poster boy for sanity.”

“Will you at least talk to Mom if I put her on the phone?”

The thought of hearing his mom’s voice after all this time makes Dean’s chest tighten up so fast he can barely let out a gasp. “No, I can’t. Not right now.”

Sam huffs. “When, then?”

“Soon. I don’t know when, but soon.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

Dean can tell Sam is getting really tired of him giving the run-around, but he honestly doesn’t know when he’ll be okay enough to talk to anyone from back home other than Sam or Rufus. It all still feels too raw, and he doesn’t know what he wants to say or hear. He doesn’t know what he needs to do to make this all better. “I know. I’m working on it, Sammy.”

After they say their goodbyes, Dean climbs into bed, but it takes him quite a while to fall asleep. He’d been too afraid to ask about Castiel, and since Sam didn’t offer any information on his own, Dean has no idea how Castiel is or what he’s been doing. He wonders which college Castiel decided on, and if he’s made any friends where he is. Castiel has never had an easy time making friends, but it got easier for him the older they got. He wonders if Castiel has kissed anyone else since Dean. If he has, it’s Dean’s fault for running away and leaving him behind.

He turns over onto his side, punching his pillow in frustration. Maybe he should start thinking about going back home, even if only for a visit. He falls asleep before he begins to seriously consider it, and the next morning when he wakes up, he’s forgotten all about it.

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Just a few weeks later, right before Dean’s birthday, the decision to return home is taken out of his
hands when he receives a call from Rufus in the middle of the night.

He answers the phone, still half asleep and cursing the loud ringing. “Hello?”

“Dean, it’s Rufus,” the old man says, voice grave. “You need to come home, son. Your daddy’s had a heart attack.”
Chapter 10

Settle down, it’ll all be clear
Don’t pay no mind to the demons
They fill you with fear
The trouble it might drag you down
If you get lost, you can always be found
Just know you’re not alone
Cause I’m going to make this place your home
~Phillip Phillips, “Home”

It’s unsettling how quickly a life can change.

Dean leans his head against the back of his seat and stares out the dirty window of the alarmingly small express jet that’s flying him to Kansas City. He remembers the story that Missouri told him and Castiel about the preacher, Joshua, whose complete life changed in the span of one night. That poor man lost his wife, daughter, and reason for existence, all at the whim of some faulty wiring.

He shifts in his seat, trying to get more comfortable as the plane rocks with turbulence. It’s fortunate this flight wasn’t canceled, given the storm front moving through, but Dean’s not feeling so lucky, as he gives a wary eye to the puke bag nestled in the seat pocket in front of him. For the umpteenth time, he wishes he’d just told Jody to leave him alone and let him ride his bike back to Lawrence, but she was hearing none of it. He knows she was right, that he most likely would have gotten stuck somewhere because of the snowstorm, but as his stomach twists and churns with each drop and bump, he thinks maybe that would have been better than falling to his death from thirty-thousand feet before he could ever make it back to Lawrence.

The wing of the plane outside his window tilts as they hit another air pocket, and Dean has to slam the window shade down to keep from getting dizzy. He squeezes his eyes shut, and tries to think of something to take his mind off of dying in an exploding ball of fire, but the only other thing he can think about right now makes him just as upset and freaked out.

He has no clue what news awaits him when he lands. The last update Rufus had given him before he boarded was that John was in surgery, and they were most likely going to do a heart bypass. Rufus said the doctors were hesitant to perform surgery because it took them a while to get him stable, but that one of his arteries was so blocked, the risk was greater if they waited. The tone of Rufus’s voice scared Dean more than anything else; he knew when Rufus said your family needs you right now, son that the odds were not in their favor.

When he finally lands in Kansas City, Dean is tempted to kiss the ground in gratitude for finally having landed safely, but he’s too busy getting his disposable phone that he’d bought at Wal-Mart on the way to the airport turned back on, shaking it futilely to try and get a signal. Once he’s out of his terminal and nearing passenger pickup, he’s able to get a call out to Rufus.

“Hello?” the gruff old man yells over the phone.

“Rufus! Hey, it’s Dean! I’m at the airport, were you able to make it?” Rufus had said he’d try to drive out to Kansas City to pick Dean up from the airport, but with the snow coming in he wasn’t sure if he’d make it.
“Yep, I’m parked in the waiting area right now, lemme get moving and I’ll find you somewhere in the pickup area.”

He hangs up before Dean can ask him for any news, making Dean wonder if he did it on purpose to keep from having to give him bad news over the phone. He stands on the curb outside the airport doors what feels like a lifetime, bitter cold wind biting through the fabric of his jeans. He has to keep his eyes slitted almost closed to fight the gusts that twist underneath the overhang, stray snowflakes clinging to his eyelashes as he keeps on the look out for Rufus’s truck.

When Rufus finally pulls up in front of Dean, he leans over the seat to unlock the passenger door. Dean throws his duffel in ahead of himself, and before he’s got his door closed, Rufus speaks. “He made it through surgery.”

Dean exhales, not realizing he was holding his breath until now. “How is he?”

Rufus puts the truck in drive, and pulls away from the curb. “The doctors say it’s touch-and-go for now. They ended up having to do a triple bypass. Docs say that’s pretty routine, nowadays, but he had a reaction to the first anesthesia they were using, so they had to change it up, and they think it could be why he’s having complications now.”

“What kind of complications?” Dean feels like he could puke from the roller coaster his emotions are going through right now. Between this and the shitty flight, he’ll be surprised if he’s not tossed his cookies before the end of the day.

They come to a red light, and Rufus spares a look at him as he pulls the truck to a stop. “He’s not waking up like he’s supposed to.”

Dean stares at him, trying to process the words. “‘Like he’s supposed to’? What’s that mean?”

Rufus looks at him for a long moment, his face full of worry. “It means he’s not responding to them like he should be.” He shakes his head slowly, and looks forward out the windshield as the light turns green. “I’m sorry, Dean. It means he’s in a coma.”

The drive between Kansas City and Lawrence normally only takes about ninety minutes, if that. But because of the winter storm, Rufus has to take it slow, inching his way past other vehicles that are unfortunate enough to slip and slide their way into ditches and stalled out against the concrete barriers. Dean sits in the passenger seat, knees bouncing as he fidgets and shifts, wishing like hell he could grab the wheel and take over. But he knows if he did he’d wreck them within the first five minutes, his nerves too fraught to be careful and take it slow.

When they arrive at Lawrence Memorial, Dean barely waits for Rufus to stop the truck before he’s flinging the passenger door open and running into the building. He finds the elevator, and takes it up to the CCU, where Rufus told him his mom and Sam would be in the waiting room. The elevator doors open up to the nurses station, so he walks up to ask where the family waiting room is, but before he can open his mouth he hears someone call his name behind him.

“Dean?”
He turns around at the voice, and his little brother is standing there across the hall, except he’s not so little anymore as the jerk seems to have turned into a beanstalk while Dean was gone. He’s almost taller than Dean now, he realizes, and he hates himself for missing every inch he’s grown since he left.

“Hey, Sammy,” he says, his voice rough. And he wants to say more, wants to ask how Dad is and say he’s missed him and ask how Mom is and say he’s sorry for everything, but before he can even open his mouth Sam is hugging him, arms wrapped so tightly around his waist that Dean thinks he might have to stop breathing for a minute, but that’s okay.

Dean hugs Sam back, holds onto him and buries his face into the fabric of his shirt, hiding his eyes against his shoulder, because he’s crying now, right along with his brother, and he doesn’t want the nurses or the orderlies or the other families to see him lose it. Sammy’s body shakes with his sobbing, and Dean calms down long enough to wipe his own tears and snot away so that he can walk them out of the hallway and back into the waiting room.

Sam doesn’t let go for several more minutes, and Dean realizes with a stab to the heart that Sammy has been holding himself together and not allowing himself to break down for their mom because he was the only one here for her. “Where’s Mom?” he asks, once Sam has calmed down enough to blow his nose.

“She’s in the room with Dad,” Sam mutters. “We only get fifteen minutes with him every four hours, and even then it’s just one person at a time.”

Dean wipes the hair off Sam’s forehead, wondering absently how he convinced Dad to let him grow it so long. “How is he?”

Sam shakes his head, his face scrunching up as he starts to cry again. “He still hasn’t woke up, Dean.”

Leaning forward, Dean kisses the side of Sam’s head and pulls him into a hug again. “He will, Sammy. Dad’s a tough sunavabitch, right? He can do it.” The door to the waiting room opens, but Dean doesn’t turn around to see who it is, he just keeps his arms wrapped around Sam.

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“The voice is incredulous, and sweet and so painfully sad that it takes Dean’s breath away. He lets go of Sam and stands up, turning around to see his mom facing him, her eyes swollen and red. “Hey, Mom,” he whispers, and before he’s aware of it he’s stepped forward and collapsed into her arms. “I’m so sorry,” he sobs, clutching her. “I should have been here.”

“Ssshhh,” she whispers, stroking his hair and rubbing his back. “It’s okay, you’re home, we’re all going to be okay now.”

Sam steps up beside them, wrapping his arms around them both, and the three of them stand there, hugging and crying, until they’re all cried out.

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The hospital moves John to a private room the following morning. Since they’re allowed to visit with him longer than fifteen-minute intervals, Dean insists that he will stay, so that his mom and Sam can go home for a few hours. They’ve both been here since the beginning, and the exhaustion written across their faces twists the guilt in Dean’s gut.

Dean sits awkwardly in the uncomfortable hospital chair, trying in vain to find a position that won’t kill his back. He watches the blips on the heart monitor, tries to figure out what all the different numbers and levels mean on all the machines hooked up to his dad, but it’s all like Latin to him. The first hour he’s there, he freaks out every time an alarm beeps, thinking it means his dad has stopped breathing. He runs out into the hallway and grabs the first nurse he sees, rushing them in to help, but they always just smile at him, check one of the machines, push a button, and walk out. He hates not understanding what’s going on, and feels like he’s going to go crazy from always thinking the worst every time something beeps, until a new nurse comes on shift.

One of the machines starts beeping again, and Dean runs out for what feels like the thousandth time to grab a nurse. When she glances at the machines, she frowns, pushing some numbers on the one hooked up to his IV. “That beeping just means his drip has stopped. No biggie, but we’ll probably need to put in a new catheter soon,” she says.

Dean exhales a sigh of relief. “Thank god someone is actually telling me something. I don’t know what any of this crap is, so if I hear an alarm, I panic.”

The nurse smiles at him, holding out her hand. “Hi, I’m Tessa. You want me to explain what everything here does?”

She spends the next twenty minutes going over all the machines, as well as explaining what Dean can expect from the nurses’ rounds and routines. It’s more than anyone on staff here has ever said to him, and he feels like he could hug her for being so patient with him. There’s a kindness in her eyes that makes him feel comforted, and for the first time since he got the phone call from Rufus, he feels like he can relax for a bit.

“Have you eaten anything today?” Tessa asks, finishing up her checks of John’s vitals.

Dean’s stomach chooses this moment to growl loud enough for probably the entire floor to hear, causing them both to laugh. “No, I just hadn’t had the chance to grab something. I didn’t wanna leave him here alone,” he says, nodding at his dad.

She finishes writing notes in her chart, and looks up at him. “I’ll have something sent up for you. Do you like pizza?”

Dean stares at her. “I…sure, I guess. How much will I owe you for it?” he asks, pulling his wallet out of his back pocket.

Tessa waves his hand away. “It’s on us. The nurses on the floor keep up a collection for times like this. I’ll go ahead and get it ordered for you.” She eyes the pillow propped against the back of Dean’s chair, where he’d been trying to make it less unbearable to sit in. “I’ll get a recliner sent up here, too. These chairs suck.”

He watches her fluff his dad’s blanket, tucking his legs in tighter. “I don’t know what to say, Tessa. Thank you so much.”

She smiles at him and winks. “Not all of us are like Nurse Ratched, especially when the family
members are as cute as you are.”

He blushes, his face turning redder when she laughs at him. “Don’t worry, this isn’t an episode of *Doctor Sexy, MD*. I don’t usually go for jailbait, anyways.”

After assuring him that she’ll get his supper ordered soon, she leaves him alone with his dad again, closing the door behind her. Dean pulls the chair up close to John’s bed, and sits down. He stares at his father’s face, trying not to focus on how lifeless it seems. “Hey, at least you ended up with a cool nurse, right?” he jokes, trying to make his voice sound light. His eyes rake over John’s face, willing a response from him, *anything*, but his face remains the same. Dean’s face crumples, his lip quivering as he pleads. “Come on, Dad, please. Please don’t leave us.”

John wakes up the following day.

It’s only for a couple minutes, and Dean isn’t even there when it happens. Mary and Sam had relieved him at the hospital so that Dean could go home and shower and sleep for a few hours. Dean wakes up to the phone ringing, Sam on the line laughing and crying between words of “He woke up, Dean! Dad’s gonna be okay!”

Dean wants to jump in the Impala and rush down there immediately, but Mary gets on the phone to dissuade him. “Honey, he already fell back asleep, and the doctor says he probably won’t wake up for another several hours, at least. You get your rest, and come back up here later on today, okay?”

Dean tries to go back to sleep, but he’s too excited and relieved, so he walks around the house, instead. It’s so strange being here after being gone for so long. Everything looks different, but at the same time, it’s all the same. It’s his childhood home, but it feels almost like he’s in a stranger’s house. He stares out the kitchen window into the backyard, and sees the giant oak tree. Their treehouse is there, just as it’s always been, and Dean aches to climb up the ladder, but he can’t bring himself to do it.

He misses Castiel so much.

He tries to shake off those thoughts, and goes upstairs to shower. He spends the next couple hours paying visits to Bobby and Rufus, updating them with the good news of John waking up. He stops by Charlie’s house, but isn’t surprised to learn that she’s off at college. Her mom assures him that Charlie’s cell phone number is the same, so he finds a place to park so he can give her a call.

She answers just as he’s about to hang up. “Hello?”

“Charlie? Hey, uh, it’s Dean.”

There’s silence on the other end for several beats. “Huh, the only Dean I know was a jerkface who left town without saying goodbye like a year ago, so this couldn’t possibly be—”

“Ha ha, very funny, how are you, assmunch?”

“Are you seriously asking me that question after disappearing like you did? WHERE THE HELL
HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Dean drops his face in his hand. “I’m sorry, dude, okay? I just…I had to get away. Shit hit the fan, and I couldn’t take it anymore.” He looks out his windshield at the park across the street. It’s the same playground where he first met Castiel all those years ago. “So, I got on my bike and drove east, ended up in Tennessee.”

“Is that where you’ve been all this time? What have you been doing?”

“I got a job there, a place to stay…it’s nice there,” Dean answers. He really doesn’t feel like going into details, so he changes the subject. “So, Cal Tech, huh?”

Charlie snorts. “Do you really think I could pass up the opportunity to go to a nerd school with a beaver for a mascot? It’s like this place was made for me.”

Dean laughs, loudly. He’s missed this. “So, you been trapping a lot of beavers since you got there?”

“Yeah, I bet you wanna hear all the dirty details, you little perv,” she teases. “Have you talked to Cas?”

Dean’s stomach clenches at the mention of Castiel. “No, I haven’t.”

Charlie sighs. “You’re an idiot, you know that, right?”

“Yeah, Charlie, I know.”

“You want his number at school?”

Dean stares at the park across the street. He doesn’t understand how everything can feel so different after being gone only a year. “No, not right now. I just need some time.”

“How much more time could you need?” Charlie scoffs. “Dude, do you have any idea how much you hurt him by just leaving like that? I’m not one to jump on the guilt train, but you need to get your shit in order.” She’s silent for several seconds before continuing. “Okay, enough with the obligatory you hurt my friend crap, will you be back in Lawrence over summer break?”

“I’m there now,” Dean says quietly, and proceeds to tell her all that’s happened in the past few days. They talk for another ten minutes or so before Charlie has to beg off, claiming she has a history class across campus. When they hang up, Dean climbs out of the Impala, and walks across the street.

It’s so strange how much smaller everything feels. He’s only been gone for a year, but it might as well be a lifetime, given how foreign everything feels. The monkey bars they used to hang daringly from now don’t even take his toes off the ground when he reaches for them. He squeezes himself onto one of the swings, moving back and forth as he stares down at his boots. There’s still snow on the ground from the storm a few days ago, but it’s gray and sludgy from the warming temperatures, and it encourages his feelings of melancholy.

He should be relieved and happy over the news of his dad waking up, as well as finally being home again. But he can’t shake feeling like a stranger here now, and he wonders if things have changed so much that it could never feel like home again. He’s not even sure if he wants it to be home
again, but it’d be nice to feel he has a place here if he decides to stay.

He shakes off the feelings of loneliness, and goes back to the Impala, enjoying the purr and grumble of her as he turns the ignition. At least this is one place that will always feel familiar to him; he just hates the reason he’s finally behind her wheel.

When he makes it back to the hospital, John is still asleep. Mary greets Dean with a hug and a smile that’s brighter than Dean has seen from her since he returned to Lawrence. “Did you get some rest?”

Dean nods, not wanting his mom to worry. “Yeah, I got lots. You and Sam can go home now, if you want. I’ll stay here while you get some supper and sleep for the night.”

Once they’re gone, Dean pulls his notebook from his duffel bag, along with a pen. He curls up in the recliner that Tessa had gotten sent up to the room, and begins writing. He’s not had much time for it lately, between work and finding time to make more wood sculptures. But the more monsters and weird little statues he creates to sell in the gallery, the more he remembers of the stories he and Castiel used to weave together when they were younger.

It’s not easy at first, trying to take his mind off everything enough to get the words down on paper. But he has nothing to do but sit as sentry by his father’s bedside, and the more he writes, the more effortlessly the words flow. He smiles to himself occasionally as he writes, remembering warm, golden days with Castiel by his side as they traipsed all around their neighborhood. So many of their stories involved the both of them traveling across the world, finding adventures and fighting monsters and evil, and never leaving each other’s side.

*We’re a team, right? You jump, I jump.*

Dean sighs, dropping the pen on the table next to him, and squeezing his eyes shut. How the hell did things get so fucked up?

********************************

Dean jumps, opening his eyes with a start. He hadn’t planned on falling asleep, but he realizes he must have been asleep for a while because all the lights but the bedside lamp have been turned off. One of the nurses must have taken pity on him and turned them off when she came in to check Dad’s vitals. Dean glances over at his father, and finds his eyes open and staring back at him.

“Hey, Dean-o,” his dad whispers, voice rough from disuse.

Dean rushes to stand up, reaching over to grab his hand. “Dad! Hey, how…how are you feeling?”

John smiles weakly at him. “Like somebody tried to rip my heart out of my chest with some rusty pliers.”

Dean laughs, trying to drown out the realization that he came very close to never hearing his father’s voice again. “I doubt they used rusty pliers, but the rest of that’s pretty accurate.”

John stares at him for several seconds, and Dean stares back. There’s so much to say to each other,
but now’s not the time. Hopefully, they’ll find a way to communicate with each other once his dad is feeling stronger, won’t clam up and refuse to talk about their feelings once the threat of death isn’t hanging over their shoulders.

“I see our patient has finally decided to wake up and grace us with his presence,” Tessa calls out cheerfully, pushing the door open. “You mind giving us some privacy for a few minutes, Dean? Now that he’s awake, I need to do a bit more thorough check over.”

Dean nods, letting go of his dad’s hand and turning away. Before he walks out the door, he hears his dad’s voice, still weak but sounding stronger, call after him. “Dean?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

John smiles at him. “I’m glad you’re home, son.”

Dean smiles, but he’s too choked up to say anything, so he nods and waves, closing the door behind him as he leaves.

Mary corners Dean a few days later, once they’re finally both home at the same time. Sam is back in school, needing to catch up on all the work he’s missed. John is improving, albeit slowly, and the doctors have hope that he’ll be able to come home within the week. Dean’s not had a chance to talk with anyone more than a few minutes at a time, since they’ve still been staying with John at the hospital in shifts. But John is finally successful in his insistence that everyone stay at home for at least one day and night, to give themselves a break, as well as him, saying if he has to stare at people staring back at him and expecting him to break with each breath he takes that he’ll scream.

Dean is standing at the kitchen sink, looking out the window into the backyard again. He finds himself doing this, staring at the treehouse and thinking about Castiel, more and more often, but he’s still not gotten up the courage to chase the memories up into the tree.

“Have you been out to the treehouse since you got home?” Mary asks, stepping up beside Dean and scaring the crap out of him.

“Jesus, Mom, warn a guy next time,” Dean yelps. “And no, I haven’t.”

She smiles up at him. “Sam goes out there sometimes, but not very often. And Castiel used to, before he went off to school.” She studies Dean’s face, and he tries to hide how much the mention of Castiel cuts into him, but he knows it’s a piss-poor attempt. Her next words surprise him, though, as she changes the subject.

“Where did you go, when you went away?” Her eyes are curious, but they can’t hide the anguish that Dean knows is his fault. Seeing how much pain she’s been in and knowing it’s because of him makes the guilt in his chest hang heavy as lead. For the first time, he wonders at just how selfish that decision was. He’s told himself all along that he ran away for them, to keep the pain he was causing from destroying everyone. But maybe the real reason was because he was too afraid to face the consequences of his actions and to show everyone who he really is.
So, they sit down at the kitchen table, and he tells his mom everything of the time he went away. She listens quietly as he tells her of Chattanooga, about Jody and Owen, and how they welcomed him into their home. He tells her about his job as a carpenter’s assistant, and about his sculptures being a big hit in the gallery, selling more than any designer ever has in their studio. He tells her about going to the baseball games, and about how Jody bitched and complained that she had to sign Owen up for Little League because Dean wouldn't stop talking about how much fun baseball is, but how Jody then ended up loving the games and becoming an assistant coach. Then Dean tells her about how he studied and got his GED, and now he’s considering taking some creative writing classes, maybe try writing a novel in his spare time.

Throughout all of this, Mary watches him, and when Dean tells her about his GED, her eyes brim with tears. “Oh, Dean,” she says, wiping her eyes. “I’m so happy you did that, honey.” She wraps an arm around his shoulder and pulls him close.

“Thanks, Mom,” he whispers against her hair. “It was Jody who talked me into it. She dangled the promise of a raise in front of my nose to convince me.”

Mary laughs, her voice shaky. “Remind me to send her a thank-you card, then. For that, and for looking out for you all this time.”

Dean pulls back, staring down at his hands in his lap. “Mom, I just wanted to say I’m—”

“Wait,” she interrupts. “Before we get into anything like that, I want to hear why you left. You told me where you went, but I want to know why.”

Dean takes a deep breath, nodding. As hard as it is to talk about it, he knows it needs to be done, and he owes it to his mom to be open with her. “I couldn’t go to military school. And I couldn’t stand hearing you and Dad fight because of me. So, I just figured it would solve everybody’s problems if I went away.”

Mary stares at him, her face twisted with shock. “You thought it would solve everybody’s problems if you ran away?”

“I hated hearing you guys fight, Mom. It reminded me of when I was little, and you and Dad used to fight a lot, and you’d get so sad.” He shakes his head. “The thought that I was the one making you sad this time, and making Dad so upset… I couldn’t stand it. I know it was probably the wrong decision, but Mom, I really didn’t think there was any other choice.”

“Dean, running away is never the right choice,” she chides him, and Dean pulls away from her. He stands up, pacing to the other side of the table and back.

“What are you talking about?” she asks, confusion across her face.

He lets loose an exasperated breath. “Us moving to Lawrence was running away from the Marines and everything going bad in our lives. And Sam plans on running away to Stanford, along with Jo. Charlie ran off to Cal Tech, and Cas… he ran away to I don’t even know where.” Dean thinks about old man Joshua too, about how, when his wife and baby died, he ran away and hid himself from the world for the rest of his life, but he doesn’t mention that. She never knew about the lake and
his visits there with Castiel, and she wouldn’t understand how much of an impression that made on them, anyways. He stops in front of his mom, standing still, and opening his arms wide. “It’s okay for everybody else to run away, why not me?”

Mary stares at him for a very long time, her face thoughtful. She sighs, motioning for him to sit next to her. “Dean, sit down, okay?”

Dean shakes his head, but does as she asks, hanging his head in his hands to hide how upset he is. He’d thought he’d gotten past everyone else going away and leaving him behind, especially once he did it to them first, but apparently he’s not as over it as he thought.

“Honey, us moving to Lawrence,” she pauses for a second, and Dean looks up to find her staring out the window. “Us moving to Lawrence, it wasn’t us running away. It was us running to something. To a better life here, for all of us.” She meets Dean’s gaze, her eyes sad. “I grew up a military brat, and I was miserable. I hated that life. And I didn’t want my kids to have to live such an uncertain, uprooted life, too. So, when your father finally agreed it was time for him to retire from it…that wasn’t us running away and trying to hide. We were excited about this, about starting a new life.”

Dean’s brows knit together in confusion. “But I thought Dad hated moving here.”

“What? No! Of course he didn’t! It was his idea to move here and work for Bobby. Why would you think that?” she asks, genuinely surprised.

Dean shrugs. “I don’t know. He just seemed to complain a lot. Like about how boring suburbia is, and having an eight to five job, and stuff.” Now that he says it, he realizes how flimsy this belief was, him hanging this impression on just a few sentences he overheard here and there from his dad over the years.

Mary laughs. “Oh Dean, you know how your father is. He’s not happy unless he’s griping about something.” Her face becomes serious again as she watches Dean. “I know your father and I fight sometimes. We’ve gone through our rough patches, and I hate that you’ve probably heard more of our arguments than you would have liked. But he really did want to move here and start a new life. And he’s happy here – we both are - I can promise you that.”

Dean nods slowly. “I’m glad, Mom. That’s…that’s a huge relief, I guess because…well, I kinda always blamed me and Sam for us having to move here. If it wasn’t for us, you wouldn’t have been so worried about raising a family in the military.”

“If it wasn’t for you, your father and I wouldn’t have stayed together for as long as we have,” she corrects. “Because he would have never left the military if he didn’t have a family to consider, no matter how much he loved me. So, I have you to thank for my marriage. How’s that?” She raises her eyebrows at him, as if in challenge of his argument.

Dean chuckles wryly. “Okay, you win.” He takes a deep breath. “But that doesn’t change the fact that everybody else is running away to go to college.” He sticks his chin out, a stubbornness that he’s inherited from both his parents.

“Oh, sweetie,” she murmurs, pulling him in and hugging him tight. “No one - not Sam or Jo or Charlie or Castiel - is running away when they go to college. Yes, they are leaving, and yes, it’s sad that things can’t stay the same, but that’s life. Everything changes. But just because they’re going to school doesn’t mean they’re leaving you.”
She pulls back to look Dean in the eyes, placing a hand on either side of his face. “You cling so tightly to those you love, and you think just because they don’t cling as tightly back it means they don’t love you or you don’t deserve them. But sweetie, them wanting to go out into the world and find something for themselves doesn’t mean they don’t want you in their lives anymore, or that they love you any less.”

“I know, Mom, but it’s just—”

“No, no buts, Dean. Everyone leaving Lawrence to go to college has nothing to do with their feelings for you. They aren’t leaving you.”

“Okay. Okay, Mom,” he nods his head, clenching his jaw to keep from crying. He wants to believe what she’s saying, but he still can’t help remembering how awful it felt when he realized Castiel was thinking of going away to school and leaving him behind.

Almost as if she read Dean's mind, Mary asks, “Have you called Castiel yet?”

He glances up, meeting her eyes before quickly looking away. “Uh, no. I doubt he’d want to hear from me, after, you know, me leaving without saying goodbye and everything.”

Mary watches him closely as he fidgets and stares down at his hands on the kitchen table. “I spoke to him once, after you left. Dean, he…” she pauses for a moment, and Dean spares a quick glance to see her deep in thought, as if she is trying to find the right words. “What he feels for you, the bond you both share…it’s special, Dean. I’ve known it since that first summer we moved here.”

Dean goes very still, too afraid to look at her, but soaking in every word as if it were gospel. Mary sighs. “So, believe me when I say that no matter what happens, no matter how much the two of you may fight and push each other away, he will always want to hear from you.”

He nods again, not even bothering to wipe away the tears as they fall down his cheek. “Okay, I’ll remember that, Mom.”

Mary stands up, and moves to step towards the counter, but turns back, putting her hand on his shoulder and squeezing. “I don’t know if you’ve thought about whether you’re going to stay in Lawrence, or go back to Chattanooga, or wherever else, but instead of running away next time, maybe you should find something you want to run to.”

Dean looks up long enough to meet her eyes as she bends down to kiss his forehead, brushing away the tears on his cheek. “Thanks, Mom,” he whispers, voice rough with emotion.

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The following day, Mary sends Dean out in the Impala with a list of errands. He’s relieved to get out of the house and away from the hospital for a little while, as well as happy to drive around town and see places he hasn’t had a chance to visit since he’s been back. He stops off at the high school right before it lets out for the day, sneaking in to say hi to friends not yet graduated, and to some of his favorite teachers, letting them know how he’s been doing. Even though he dropped out of school and ran away, he’s proud of what he’s done since settling down in Chattanooga, and he
even stops off to get advice from Ms. Holmes about taking creative classes at college. He avoids saying where he plans on taking the classes, still not sure what he wants to do once Dad is home and recuperated enough for him to leave.

The last errand on Mom’s list is also the one he’s dreading most. He parks in front of Missouri’s house, staring up at the front porch. Missouri had been kind enough to bake a few casseroles for the Winchesters while John was in the hospital, helping out where she can while Mary was too preoccupied to see to the family’s meals herself. When Mary had asked Dean to return the casserole dishes to Missouri, he’d whined and tried to beg off doing it, saying he knows the woman will most likely chew his ass out for running away and worrying everyone.

But Mary would have none of it, so here he is, walking up to Missouri’s front door, ready to get the stink eye of the century. What he doesn’t expect, is for Missouri to open the door, take one look at him, and then pull him into her arms for the tightest, most suffocating hug he’s ever experienced.

“Dean Winchester, I should wear your hide out for scaring all of us the way you did,” she chides, squeezing him one last time and kissing his cheek before pulling away. “How is your daddy doing today?”

Dean tries to get his breathing back to normal after almost being squeezed to death. “Uh, he’s still improving. Doctors say he might be able to come home in a couple more days.”

“This is good to hear. About time your family got some good news,” Missouri says, nodding her approval.

“So, uh, Mom wanted me to return these dishes to you, and wanted me to thank you again for making the casseroles for us,” Dean says, awkwardness seeping through his pores. He tries backing away subtly, hoping this is his chance to get away unscathed, but Missouri is having none of it.

“You tell your mother I’ll be sending along some more in a day or so. In fact, you come in here, and I’ll put together another care package right now.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary, I’m sure we’ve got plenty of—”

“Dean, get yourself in this house right now, or I will call your mama and tell her you were rude to me!”

He stands there on her porch, mouth opening and closing for several seconds trying to think of something to say; realizing he has no way out of this one, he sighs and steps inside. He follows her into the kitchen, and stands there watching as she pulls out a basket and starts loading it with tupperware containers full of food. She pulls a loaf of homemade bread out of her pantry, and finishes off the basket with a gallon of sweet tea. “You had all of this homemade stuff just sitting around the house?” he asks, incredulous.

Missouri looks at him, exasperated. “I’m in charge this month of taking extra food around to the shut-ins that my church helps, so I’ve been stocking up on things.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense.” Dean reaches for the food basket, but before he can pick it up, Missouri lays a hand on his arm.

“You need to swallow your pride, and call him.”
Dean stares at her, face scrunching up in confusion. “What makes you think I’m too proud to call him?” he replies, not even bothering to ask who she’s talking about.

She rolls her eyes. “You boys have always either been too proud or too scared to say what you feel.” She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “I’ve watched the two of you dance around each other for years. You’re like magnets, either pulling close or pushing away, but your worlds have only ever about each other, since the day you met.”

“Missouri, I don’t know what you think we are, but—”

“Don’t you lie to me, boy. Even if I hadn’t figured it out years ago, I would have known as soon as I saw Castiel coming home after being with you, with love bites all over him.”

If Dean could melt into the floor and never show his face to the world again, he would. He is mortified at the thought of Missouri seeing his hickeys all over Castiel; they had been stupid enough to believe they were being discreet, at the time.

She narrows her eyes at him, apparently not concerned about the effect of her words on him.“But you running away just about tore him apart for good, and I’ll tell you right now, I won’t allow you to hurt him like that again.”

Dean stares down at the floor. “I didn’t want to hurt him,” he says, voice quiet.

“That may not have been your goal, but you ran off knowing full well what the consequences would be.”

He shakes his head, returning her gaze. “But I didn’t know,” he replies imploringly. “I thought it might even help him, since that way he wouldn’t have to worry about making the decision to leave me to go to college.”

“So, you took the decision out of his hands? You can’t just go around making other people’s choices for them. That was his decision to make, not yours. You should have trusted him to make the right one.”

Dean stares at her, surprised. He hadn’t really considered it that way before. But it still doesn’t matter, because Castiel still went away to college, and is probably not ever going to look back. “The outcome is still the same though, right? He still went off to school, doing what his dad wants and becoming some hot shot doctor someday.”

Missouri tilts her head at him. “So, no one has filled you in on what Castiel is doing?” She pauses, waiting until Dean shakes his head before continuing. “Of course, I knew all along that he’d end up going his own way, even if Castiel didn’t realize it at the time. He decided he didn’t want to become a doctor after all, and now he’s doing an arts program in Seattle.”

Dean opens his mouth in shock. “What? But, I thought…he was visiting all these schools with good pre-med programs! It seemed like a sure thing that he was going to med school.” Dean can’t believe Castiel went against his father’s wishes, after all. “I bet Dr. Novak was pissed.”

“You watch your language with me, boy,” Missouri warns. “But yes, he wasn’t very happy with Castiel. And last I’d heard, they still haven’t spoken to each other since Castiel went away to school. It’s a shame the man won’t look past his own failures to see Castiel as he really is.”
“So, why Seattle? I don’t remember him ever saying anything about a good art school there.”

Missouri smiles. “It’s because his sister is there. Anna is working her way through school, as well. She and Castiel have kept in touch, and when he sent her some of his drawings she encouraged him to apply to the University of Washington. He found out right around the time you left that they were offering him a full scholarship to their arts program.”

Wow. Dean can’t help but feel a huge surge of pride for Castiel. He knew his friend was talented, and he’s so happy to hear that others see the brilliance in his work, as well.

“He has the same cell phone number, you know,” Missouri says, watching him closely. “You should call him, Dean.”

He chews on his lip, considering her words. Before he can stop himself, he blurts out, “I thought you didn’t approve of me.” He winces once he realizes what he’s said.

Missouri snorts, picking up a dishrag and wiping the counter in front of her. “Why would you think that?”

He shrugs, not wanting to elaborate, but he figures what the hell, might as well go for broke. “I overhead you talking to Dr. Novak one day. He said he’d be glad when Cas grew out of his Winchester phase, and you didn’t seem to disagree with him.”

She rolls her eyes. “Dr. Novak is, if you’ll pardon my language since I pardoned yours, a self-important, condescending, cold, and conceited ass, who feels the entire world is beneath him and his children. I never really spoke up against him because I knew it was pointless, and that his opinion didn’t matter much to Castiel.” She steps forward, taking one of Dean’s hands between her own. “I always approved and cared for you, Dean, even when you annoyed every hair on my head. I thought of you as an adopted son, much like I always thought of Castiel. Lord knows, Castiel and you both are the reason I stayed working in that household as long as I did.”

Dean is flabbergasted by her words. He’d always thought she just tolerated him, for the sake of Castiel and, to a lesser extent, Mary. “Thanks, Missouri,” he replies, voice choked.

She smiles again, letting go of his hand to push the basket across the counter and towards him. “Now please, call Castiel. Soon. I don’t like to see you both so lost without each other, if for no other reason than he misses his best friend.”

Dean nods, and grabs the basket, heading towards the door. “Okay, I will. Just as soon as we get Dad home and settled in. I just…I need a bit more time to think things through.”

Missouri wraps an arm around his shoulder and squeezes, before letting go and opening the front door for him. “Please take care of yourself, Dean. And don’t stay away so long next time.”

He’s surprised to realize he’s kind of disappointed to say goodbye to Missouri again. “I won’t, I promise.”

He heads to the Impala feeling a little bit lighter, his chest fuzzy with the first real glimmer of hope that Castiel might be willing to see him and give him another chance.
John gets to come home from the hospital two days later. Mary, Dean, and Sam all fuss over him as they tuck him into the Impala and drive him home, laughing when he finally has enough of it four hours later, and demands that he be left alone to “take a piss alone in my own house, thank you very much.”

It’s even stranger for Dean to be back in his parents' house now that his dad is home. It still doesn’t feel like home the way it used to, and Dean’s not even sure if he ever wants it to feel that way again. Things can’t go back to the way they were before; too much has changed, and he’s grown too much to go back to that life. A part of him misses it, will always miss his childhood, and will regret the way it ended so quickly. But he realizes more than ever now that it’s time to move on and decide where he needs to be.

After several days of being cooped up at home, John begs Dean to take him out driving around. Dean is taken aback, a little uncomfortable at the thought of being confined in a car and alone with his dad for any length of time. He’d been able to avoid being alone with him for any significant length of time, up until this point. He worries that old wounds will be broached, and he really doesn’t want to fight with his dad, especially given all that’s happened lately.

Once they’re settled in the Impala, Dean looks over to John. “Where to?”

“I don’t care, just somewhere out of this driveway,” his dad laughs. “Between being stuck in the hospital and now being stuck in the house for so long, I’m starting to get claustrophobic.”

Dean smiles, putting the Impala in reverse and back out of the driveway. “That’s understandable. I think it’d be driving me crazy, too.”

He ends up driving them to Bobby’s garage, hanging back while John and Bobby talk about the goings on at work. Bobby refuses to get into details, since John isn’t supposed to be worrying about work and talking shop. John gets flustered and exasperated that Bobby’s so concerned with his health, and Dean ends up laughing at how they act like an old married couple. He keeps expecting them to go find some rocking chairs to sit in as they yell at kids to get off their lawn, and when he points this out to them, Bobby smacks him upside the head with his baseball cap.

After leaving Bobby’s, John asks Dean to take the Impala out onto the highway. “How ’bout we let her breathe a bit and stretch her legs?”

Dean can’t say no to taking the Impala out onto the highway, grinning as they roll the windows down as they pick up speed to let in some of the cold, brisk air.

“So, your mother told me about your talk the other day,” John says, after they roll the windows back up when it gets too chilly.

Dean tenses up, not wanting to have another heart-to-heart, especially not with his dad. “Dad, we don’t have to—”

“Dean, I want you to know that I have never regretted anything that I’ve done for the sake of my family,” John says.

Dean can feel his dad staring at him, but he keeps his own eyes on the road ahead. “I know, Dad. I was just a stupid kid, I didn’t know what I was thinking.”
John returns his gaze to the window. “And son, I’m sorry about the whole military school thing. I wasn’t thinking clearly, so I assumed what would have worked for me would work for you.” He reaches forward to turn the radio volume down, and rests his hand on Dean’s shoulder. “I was wrong, and I will always regret making you feel you had no choice but to run away.”

Dean doesn’t trust his voice at the moment, so he just nods, shooting his father a grateful look before returning his eyes to the road. They drive in silence for several minutes, and Dean is beginning to think the serious talk is over, but then John clears his throat.

“Everything that’s happened…it’s made me realize I shouldn’t let things go unsaid. I’m very proud of you, son. Not for running away and never calling us - that was the worst time of my life, and your mom’s, too - but for what you did with yourself when you went away. And of the person you’ve become.”

Dean spares a look at his father, and John smiles when their eyes meet. “Thanks, Dad,” he says, voice hoarse with emotion.

“You’ve become a man that I’m proud to call my son,” John continues. He shifts in his seat, looking out the passenger window at the bare trees zooming past along the side of the highway. “And I just…” He exhales, and Dean glances over to see his mouth moving, as if he’s trying to speak but can’t find the words. “I just want you to know, that whatever you’re doing, and whoever you’re with…as long as you’re happy, I will always be proud of you and happy for you.”

Dean’s heart beats faster as his body goes still. Did he…did Dad just give him and Castiel his blessing? Dean wasn’t even aware his dad knew anything about what was going on between them. Did his mom tell him about them, or had they been that obvious to everyone? He can feel his cheeks flushing from embarrassment, both over realizing that his dad knows about his gay relationship with his best friend, and over just how happy it makes him to have his father’s approval of his feelings for Castiel and what he’s made of his life, so far.

“Maybe, if you go up to see Castiel in Seattle, I’ll let you take the Impala,” John says, a nostalgic note to his voice.

Dean whips his head around to stare at his father in disbelief. “What? You’d let me take Baby?”

John smiles, meeting Dean’s gaze. “I think maybe it’s time for her to move on with you. I think she’s missed getting out on the open road, and she deserves someone young that will take her out for adventures every once in a while.”

“Dad, I don’t…I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, you can start with promising to take as good care of her as I always have,” John laughs. “And by taking notes when I go over all her maintenance stuff. If I find out you’re not staying on top of her care, then I’ll snatch her right back.”

Dean nods quickly. “Oh yeah, I’d never neglect her! She’ll be in good hands.”

John leans forward, sliding a hand along her smooth dashboard. “I know, son. I’d never doubt you.”

Dean looks over at his father, and returns his smile. “Thanks, Dad. For everything you said, and for
the Impala, and for...for everything.”

John nods silently, reaching over to slap a hand across Dean’s shoulder. They drive in silence the rest of the way home, enjoying the ride.

Another morning of staring at the treehouse through the kitchen as he drinks his cup of coffee makes Dean feel like a stalker. So many firsts happened within those walls, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t scared to face the memories head-on. He would have thought, after all this time, that things wouldn’t still feel so raw, but in a way, it feels worse. Because he’s started letting himself hope again, hope that maybe they can find their way back to each other, after everything that’s happened. All the excuses that he’s told himself over the past year - that Castiel is better off without him, that maybe Castiel didn’t care for him as much as he’d hoped, that maybe Castiel was glad to be rid of him - they’re all starting to feel flimsy and weak. Like maybe they were things he was telling himself to make himself feel better for abandoning what they had.

Dean sets his coffee mug down on the counter, and takes a deep breath. Just buck up and go out there, he thinks. Stop obsessing and do it.

The rungs of the ladder feel smaller underneath his hands, which is ridiculous because it’s not like he grew into a giant while he was away. Once he climbs into the treehouse, his heart clenches as he takes a look around. The place looks deserted and unused, which is no surprise, but that doesn’t make it hurt any less. This place was the center of their world for so long, and it’s seen so many things. He crawls over to one of the bean bags, wiping away a few dead leaves and twigs.

He lies back in the lumpy chair, closing his eyes to all the dust and leaves that have collected over the year. It’s so quiet up here, the cold of the dreary winter morning making the silence almost deafening. He wonders if it was always this quiet, and maybe their fun and laughter forced the silence away. But even when they were sitting up here and quiet together, the silence was never this overwhelming and oppressive.

Dean lets his gaze wander around the dwelling, taking in all the books and pictures and other items that were left up here. It looks like Sam has been watching over the telescope and other items more dear to them, and he’s grateful for that. It seems like Sam is always there, waiting to take care of them, and pick up the pieces when they break.

His eyes are drawn to the corner behind the other bean bag, where their secret notebox is. Over the years, they'd ended up using the compartment more as a mailbox than anything like a time capsule, as had been originally planned. They'd leave notes and surprises for each other occasionally, but once they reached high school, their cell phones kind of made the compartment unnecessary. The piece of wood that keeps the compartment snug and unnoticeable is loose, and behind it Dean can see paper sticking out. He crawls over to it, pulling the slat loose, and when he does, a stack of notes falls out. They’ve been bound together with string, and with shaking hands, Dean pulls the string loose. He opens the first note to find Castiel’s neat, clean handwriting:

**Dean—**
Where are you? I called your cell phone, but you’re not answering, and when I called Sam he said you’re missing.

You didn’t run away, did you? Please be here.

Call me.

Cas

Dean’s stomach twists with guilt. He pulls open the next note.

It’s been days. WHERE ARE YOU?? Are you still here and just hiding? Why would you run away without even saying anything? If you’re still here, I’m going to kick your ass for scaring me and everybody else like this.

CALL ME PLEASE

—Cas

Fuck, fuck, *fuck*. Dean knew it was probably tearing people up when he left without saying a word, but knowing that and reading Castiel’s frantic words as it was happening are two very different things. He wants to stop, but he can’t seem to look away as he opens up the next several notes.

Dean—

I can’t believe you just left like that without looking back. How could you? How could you just walk away without me?? I know we had a fight, but I thought we’d made up. I’m sorry I yelled at you, I’m sorry I made you feel like you weren’t important to me.

I wish you would just call me. Why didn’t you take your phone? Where did you go???

— C

Dean—
When you asked me to run away with you, did you even think for one second about why I wouldn’t want to? Dean, my sister ran away. And when I saw how much damage and pain Anna caused without looking back, there’s no way I could do that, too. I don’t care how much my father pisses me off, no one deserves that.

I never told you about my mother. I kept waiting for you to ask, but I guess you could tell it wasn’t an easy subject for me. She died while giving birth to me, so I never knew her. I think a part of me always blamed myself for her being gone, and I think the reason I’ve agreed to my father’s wishes all my life is because I felt guilty. I don’t know. All I know is no matter how much of a dick he is, I couldn’t just up and run away like Anna did.

I wish you had stayed around long enough for me to tell you all of that.

— C

Dean –

Sam just told me you left a note for him, but nothing for me. So I wasn’t even worthy of one of those Dear John letters? Did you really have nothing to say to me???

I hate you so much right now, Dean. Fuck you.

— C

Dean –

It’s springtime, and everybody is getting excited about graduation and summer break and going away to college, and all I can do is think about you and wonder where you are and hope you’re safe. Is it wrong that a part of me almost wishes you were dead or in a hospital somewhere, so that would explain why you haven’t come home?

Do you ever even miss me?

— C

Dean—

I don’t know why I keep writing these notes and leaving them here for you. Maybe it’s cathartic for me. But I miss my best friend, and I miss telling you things that I know only you will understand, like how sometimes I still think about old man Joshua, and I wonder, if there is a
heaven, if he keeps a garden up there for his wife and his daughter. Or would that be more his wife’s version of heaven?

I miss my version of heaven. Sometimes, when I wake up from dreaming, I hear myself call your name, but when I open my eyes you’re still not there.

—C

Dean—

I fought with my father today. I’ve decided I don’t want to be a doctor. I want to go to art school. Anna convinced me at the beginning of this school year to send an application and some of my drawings into the college where she goes to school, and they awarded me a scholarship. I never told you this because I still wasn’t sure what I was going to do.

There’s so many things I didn’t tell you before that I should have. I hated feeling like I had to do what everyone expected of me and feeling like I was boxed into a kind of life that wasn’t for me. I was just so scared and unsure of myself. You were always so fearless and open and loved life too much to be afraid, I didn’t think you’d understand, and I didn’t want you to pity me or feel like I was dragging you down. It’s funny, right? I was so scared of holding you back, and turns out you were afraid of holding me back, too.

Why didn’t we just talk to each other about it? We weren’t scared to talk to each other about other things, so why this?

—C

Dean curses to himself, staring out the window through the bare branches. He was such a fucking idiot. Why didn’t he see all along that Castiel felt just like he did? It could have saved him a lot of heartache if he’d just been brave enough to open up to him.

There’s only a couple more notes left, so he folds open the next one in the stash.

Dean—

It’s summertime, and I keep thinking about how different everything was this time last year. There were a thousand times over the years since we first met that I’ve wanted to kiss you. Honestly, I think I’ve wanted it since the moment we first met, though I didn’t understand my feelings at the time.
You were the most brilliantly beautiful thing I’d ever seen. I know how much you hate it when I say things like that, but you’re not here to yell at me and brush it off, so I’m going to say it now, without restraint. In that first moment I saw you, you became my world, and I was so desperate to feel worthy of your friendship. I would have been happy just to be friends for the rest of our lives, if it meant I got to be near you.

That first time we kissed, right before high school, I wanted to die. Because it was everything I’d wanted, but I knew I’d never have it again. And then the second time we kissed, I wanted to die because I didn’t think I could ever be that happy again.

And now it’s summer, and I’m remembering how I said I planned to kiss every inch of you someday. I’m bitter because you left before I got the chance. I’m remembering how you taste, and I wish I knew how you taste everywhere. I’m remembering how you felt inside me, and I’m jealous of you because I never got the chance to return the favor. I want to feel the inside of you, to taste the inside of you, and a part of me hates you for going away before I could.

Sometimes I wish I could forget you. Could run off and start a new life, just like you did. Are you letting someone else touch you now? Have you let someone else inside?

— C

Dean—

I leave for Seattle in a few days. I’m happy because it means I can finally get away from here. I didn’t used to hate being in Lawrence. Not until you left. Now every street and every corner and every playground haunt me because each one holds a memory of you.

I’ve decided Seattle is the start of my new life without you. So I’m leaving behind everything that reminds me of you. And I’m not going to draw anymore pictures of you.

I know what you’re thinking. I never drew any pictures of you, right? That’s what I always told you because I didn’t want you to know. I didn’t want to share my drawings of you with anybody because I’m a jealous, selfish fool who was too greedy to share the one thing of you that was completely my own. You have always been my favorite subject to draw, from the first day we met. I have wasted so many hours trying to perfect the bow of your lip, the green of your eyes, the slender curve of your fingers, the freckles across your back.

So I’m leaving here all the drawings I kept of you. I doubt you’ll find them, or if you’ll even come here again, but if you do, maybe now you’ll know fully what I was always too afraid to say.

If you still don’t get it, let me bottom-line it for you:

I love you.
I have always loved you. And I’ve no doubt a part of me always will.

But I can’t keep doing this, Dean. I can’t keep hoping you’ll return to me, I can’t keep being pissed at you, and I can’t keep my life on hold while I wait for a day that will never come.

Wherever you are, I truly hope you are happy. I hope you found whatever it is you felt you needed. Is it selfish to hope you miss me as much as I still miss you?

I guess I’ll always be selfish when it comes to you.

— C

Dean tries to wipe away the tears running down his cheeks, but it only makes him cry harder. He sits against the wall, knees pulled up to his chest, and sobs. He can’t believe how fucking stupid he was to leave Castiel like this. He should have seen it, he should have known Castiel’s feelings were as strong as his own. Why was he so wrapped up in his own insecurities to not see it?

He cries himself out, wrapping his arms tight around his stomach. All those times he was hurting and feeling sorry for himself, he hadn’t even realized that he’d hurt Castiel that much more by running away without a word.

He thinks of Castiel writing that he was leaving his drawings here, so he twists around to stick his hand into their compartment where the letters had been stashed. He feels around, not being able to see down inside the hole, and his hand finally comes upon a notebook. He pulls it out carefully, realizing it’s not a notebook but a sketchpad, full of drawings, with other loose pieces of paper bound to it.

He opens the pad, and the first drawing he sees is one of him when they were ten. It must have been one of the first drawings Castiel did of him, and his age shows in his talent, but it’s still a good picture. It captures Dean balancing on a log laid across one of the creeks behind Castiel’s house, and Dean smiles when he recognizes the t-shirt he’s wearing. It’s one of Castiel’s, and Dean knows exactly when this drawing takes place because he remembers one time he was eating lunch at Castiel’s house and he’d spilt Kool-Aid on his shirt. Missouri had asked and chided him, making him take the shirt off so she could wash it while they played outside.

The next several drawings are of Dean still young, either running or laughing or smiling, staring straight through the canvas. Dean knows Castiel is drawing him as he’s looking at Castiel, because even then Dean always had a special smile only for Cas.

The drawings get better as the subject gets older, lines more sure and intricate in detail. There are quite a few of Dean at the lake, what must have been that first summer they discovered it. Dean staring off at the water, deep in thought and unaware of being seen. Dean naked from the waist up, lying on the pier with eyes closed, beads of sweat and water dancing in the sunlight across his skin. These drawings are more intimate, almost sensual as the lines of his body are appreciated with strokes of charcoal and colored pencil.

There are pictures of Dean in his baseball uniform, smiling out on the field in the hot summer sun, and pictures of him on his motorcycle, leaning back on the seat as if waiting for Castiel to climb
on. As he gets closer to the end of the sketchpad, it’s obvious that the drawings were created after their relationship changed. There are drawings of Dean asleep in bed, his chest bare and sheets pooling around his waist, with eyelashes fanning across his cheek and lips barely parted. The detail is stunning, and each pencil stroke looks almost like a caress against his skin.

All of these pictures, from all these years, it’s overwhelming for Dean. He’d spent all this time believing Castiel didn’t think he was interesting enough to draw, and in the back of his mind he’d used this as just one more piece of proof that Castiel didn’t care for him as much as Dean wanted. But all of this, it shows that nothing could have been further from the truth.

“Hey, Dean! You up here?” Sam calls from the ground below.

“Uh, yeah, Sammy, what’s up?” When he hears his brother start to climb up the ladder, Dean wipes the remaining tears off his face, and quickly but carefully pulls the sketchpad back together and closes it, not wanting anyone else to see something so personal between him and Castiel.

“Hey, Mom wanted to know if you were gonna be eating lunch with us or if you were going somewhere.” Sam climbs into the treehouse, sitting down on the floor next to Dean.

Dean looks at Sam, and then away, staring at the branches outside the window. “I’ve been such an idiot, Sammy.”

“Um, you don’t have to be a rocket scientist to decide what you wanna do about lunch,” Sam snorts.

Dean shoots him a look. “I’m not talking about lunch, assface. I’m talking about…everything else.”

Sam sighs. “Well, duh, you have been an idiot about everything else.” He bumps his shoulder against Dean’s, and smiles. “Is this about Cas?”

Dean nods, but doesn’t say anything, not knowing even where to begin. But as usual, Sammy doesn’t need him to explain. “Well, you came back and fixed things between all of us. Why couldn’t you do the same with him?”

“But what if he doesn’t want to ever see me again?”

“You’ll never know until you try, right?” Sam asks. “Look, all I know is the two of you…you’re better together, instead of apart. And I think it’s stupid for you to stay away from each other out of pride or because you think the other is better off. You were miserable without him, right?”

Dean chews on his lip. “Yeah.”

Sam nods. “He was miserable without you, too. He didn’t like to show it, and pretended he was fine and coping, but I know him enough to know he was miserable.”

“But what if he’s happy now, in Seattle?”

“Like I said, you won’t know until you go to him,” Sam retorts, exasperated. “Instead of running away scared like you did before, why don’t you try running to him?”

Dean stares at Sam, his eyes narrow and suspicious. “Did Mom tell you to say that?”
“Why would Mom tell me to tell you to go running to your boyfriend?”

Dean huffs. “Because she was saying something like that the other day. That maybe I needed to find something I wanted to run to, instead of running away from everything.”

Sam purses his lips, thinking. “Well, at least we know one of us got the Campbell intelligence.”

Dean guffaws, pushing against Sam with his shoulder and ruffling his hair as he stands up. “I’ll let that one pass, on account of I owe you for not hitting me with the puppy dog eyes to make me feel guilty for running away.”

Sam follows him as they climb down the ladder. “I’m saving the puppy dog eyes for something really important, like convincing you to take me somewhere for my graduation present in a few years.”

“Heh, maybe that’ll give me plenty of time to build up my immunity to the puppy dog eyes,” Dean jokes, pulling his brother in for a hug.

Through lunch and the rest of the afternoon, Dean's thoughts keep returning to Castiel’s letters, and to what Sam and their mom said. He knows if he doesn’t go to Castiel, he will spend the rest of his life wondering what if? What if he’d just gotten up the courage to finally go to Castiel and admit that he needed him? What if he could spend the rest of his life with Castiel by his side? What if they could finally stop trying to live by everyone else’s rules and make up their own rules as they go?

What if, instead of being afraid and running away, he ran towards the one person he knows he could spend the rest of his life being happy with?

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Dean is on the road to Seattle the following day.

He’d been hesitant to tell his parents once he’d finally made up his mind to go. He didn’t want them to feel like he was abandoning them again, especially now when his dad is on the mend and his mom still needs support with everything. But all it’d taken was him giving her a hug and whispering in her ear, “I think I figured out what I want to run to,” and the moment she heard the word Seattle she was packing up supplies and sandwiches for the long road trip ahead.

Dean calls Missouri that morning to get Anna’s contact information. He wants to make this as much of a surprise as he can, though he has no idea yet how he’s going to approach Castiel. He figures if he can convince Anna to help him out, then everything else will fall into place.

As he’s packing up the Impala, John and Mary follow him around, giving him advice on the road trip, and worrying over him and the length of the drive. He supposes maybe they feel the need to make up for not getting the chance to do this the first time he went away, so he humors them, and even revels in the worry and attention a little bit. It starts to go from cute to embarrassing though, when they both start to give him advice about Castiel.
“Have you thought about how you’re going to approach Castiel?” Mary asks, tucking blankets into the back seat in case the car quits on him in the freezing cold.

Dean can feel his face flushing, and it burns even hotter when he notices his dad watching and smiling at him. “No, I thought I’d figure it out on the drive there.”

“Would you like me to bake up some of his favorite cookies?”

“What? No, Mom, I don’t think peanut butter chocolate chip cookies are what’s gonna sway him in my favor,” Dean replies, trying to hide his exasperation.

John chuckles behind him. “I don’t know, Dean, your mom’s cookies would make me take notice, if someone was trying to woo me.”

Dean waves them both away from him as he runs back into the house, using the excuse of needing to take one last piss as a chance to get away from them. When he steps back outside, Sam is waiting next to the Impala with their parents. “Hey, Dean, I made you a road trip CD last night,” he says, handing over the CD in its sleeve.

“Oh. Wow, thanks, Sammy,” Dean says, adding, “I hope there’s no emo shit on this one.”

“Dean! Language!” Mary admonishes, with John laughing behind her.

Once he’s packed up and promises to call them frequently to let them know how he’s faring on the road, Dean backs out of the driveway slowly. The three of them wave as he pulls away, and he smiles and waves back, swallowing down the lump in his throat. As much as he hates his father having a heart attack and almost dying, he’s grateful he got the chance to set things right. He’d missed his family more than he even realized, and he makes a promise to himself that he’ll never go that long without seeing them again.

He leans forward, popping the CD into the player, wondering what in the hell convinced his dad to install a CD player into the Impala in the first place. But before he can think on it too long, Sam’s voice comes out over the speakers.

“Hey, Dean. I thought you might like a mix CD of songs that will get you pumped up to find Cas and proclaim your undying love to him, so these songs are for the two of you. Hope you like it!”

Dean narrows his eyes at the road in front of him, suspicious, and when the first riffs of that godawful *500 Miles* song starts playing, Dean jumps in surprise. “Oh, fuck you, Sammy!” he yells, but instead of turning it off, he lets the song play, smiling despite himself, as he begins the two-thousand mile trek to Castiel.

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It takes three days to reach Seattle. Dean is anxious to get there, but he still enjoys the long drive. This is the kind of trip he’d always dreamed of making in the Impala. Of course, in his fantasies, it was summertime instead of the dead of winter, and he had Sam or Castiel along with him, instead of being on his own. But it’s close enough to make him content for the moment, and he’s hoping the result of the trip will have Castiel by his side soon enough.
He’s also grateful for the extra time so that he can think about how to talk to Castiel, and convince him to give Dean another chance. He knows Castiel is probably still pissed at him, and he has every right to be. He’s not going to try to talk him out of his anger. He just needs to make Castiel see that if he’s willing to work through that, and willing to let Dean begin to try to make things up to him, then maybe they can figure out a way to be a part of each other’s lives again.

Dean does his best not to get his hopes up because he knows that what he did to Castiel could be considered unforgivable. But he’d always regret it if he didn’t at least try, and now that he has a plan for approaching Castiel, maybe things really will work out.

The evening before he arrives in Seattle, he gives Anna a call. He never really knew her much before she ran away from home. He’s not even sure she’ll remember him, but as soon as he says his name, he can feel the cold shoulder through the phone line.

“Why are you calling me, Dean?”

Dean figures he should at least be grateful she hasn’t hung up on him yet. “I’m coming to Seattle to see Cas.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea, given you’re a shitty asshole who stomped all over his heart and abandoned him.”

Ouch. He deserves that. “Look, trust me, I know I’m a shitty asshole,” Dean admits, “and no way I deserve him, and if I need to spend the rest of my life groveling at his feet to try and make it up to him, I will. That’s why I’m coming.”

“So what do you want me to do about it?”

“I need your help.”

Dean has to hold the phone away from his ear to drown out her laughter. “You hurt my brother,” she clips out then. “Why would I ever want to help you?”

Dean exhales loudly. “I don’t know, maybe because you know I could make him happy?”

There’s silence on the other end for several seconds, and Dean starts to wonder if she hung up on him, before she speaks again. “You know, Missouri called me and warned me that you were coming. She told me to give you a chance.”

Dean never in a million years would have thought Missouri would have been one of his biggest cheerleaders, but it seems there is a lot he still has yet to learn. “Anna, please.”

She sighs. “What do you need me to do?”

He pumps a fist in the air, and makes a mental note to hug the fuck out of Missouri next time he sees her. “Just tell me what Cas’s school schedule is and the names of his teachers. I can do the rest.”

*******************************************************************************
It takes a lot of begging and pleading and flirting, along with a crisp fifty-dollar bill, to convince the assistant professor currently teaching Castiel’s English Composition class to go along with his plan. Dean stands outside in the hallway, peeking through the tiny window in the door. When he catches a glimpse of Castiel sitting in the back of the classroom, hair ruffled and sweatshirt hanging loose over his frame, his stomach starts turning cartwheels. After all this time, seeing Castiel still gives him butterflies in the best ways.

When the professor passes out the quizzes for everyone to get started on, Dean waits five minutes, as was planned, and then opens the door and steps up to the teacher’s desk. He looks down at the professor, who smirks up at him and rolls her eyes, and hands her a piece of paper.

She clears her throat, and begins to speak. “Excuse me everyone, it seems we have a new student to introduce,” she announces, reading the script he’d written for her. He wasn’t sure if this is how it happened word-for-word, but he figures it’ll be close enough. “Everyone, this is Dean Winchester, transferring here from Lawrence High.”

Dean tries not to look at Castiel, doing his best to perform this the way it played out the first time so long ago, but he can’t help but glance up quickly as he walks to a seat near the front row. The look of shock on Castiel’s face would be enough to make Dean laugh in any other situation, but instead he just takes his seat quietly amidst the curious stares of the other students, and hopes the rest of his plan goes just as smoothly.

When the professor dismisses everyone at the end of class, Dean fidgets with the notebook in his hand, delaying himself as much as he can to see if Castiel will approach him. A part of him is deeply terrified that Castiel will just walk out of the room without looking back. If he does, Dean doesn’t know what he’ll do.

After what feels like hours, he spots movement out of the corner of his eye, and looks up to find Castiel standing next to his desk. “What are you doing here, Dean?” Castiel asks softly.

Dean smiles at him, hesitant and hopeful. “I’m attending school, obviously. Or, actually, pretending to attend.”

Castiel’s eyes flick to the stragglers in the room, and Dean wonders if he's remembering how this went down when he first transferred to Lawrence High. Will he grab Dean’s arm and drag him out of the classroom, like how Dean did to him? Will he want to push Dean up against the lockers, feel his body against his own, like how Dean did? Of course, Dean hadn’t realized at the time that’s what those feelings were; back then, he’d just known his need to be near Castiel wasn’t something he’d been feeling for any other friend he had.

But Castiel doesn’t grab him and pull him into the hallway. He just looks at Dean, eyes sad and tired, before turning and walking away. Dean’s heart sinks, but he’s not giving up just yet. He climbs out of the desk, following Castiel into the hallway and grabbing his elbow. “Cas, wait.”

Castiel turns around quickly, yanking his arm out of Dean’s grasp. “Wait what, Dean? Wait until you decide it’s time to leave again?”

“Cas, look, I know what I did was wrong—”

“Wrong?! You destroyed me, Dean. I trusted you, with everything, and you just picked up and left without even looking back!” Castiel’s face is pale, his eyes glassy, and Dean hates himself just a
little bit more when he notices Castiel’s hand shaking as he adjust the strap of his bookbag.

“Cas, please…” he tries again. “You can hate me for what I did. God knows I wouldn’t blame you if you never forgave me, and I’m not ever going to forgive myself for letting you and everyone else I love down. But you have to know this…I was always looking back. Every moment of every day, I was thinking of you and missing you, and hating myself for being too much of a coward and an idiot for not coming home.”

Dean pauses to see if his words are having any effect on Castiel, to see if he’s getting through to him, but Castiel just stares at the floor, face blank. “Cas, I found your letters. I read every last one of them. And I’m sorry. Fuck, Cas…I’m so sorry for not seeing it before, for not seeing that you loved me just as much as I loved you.”

Castiel’s eyes dart up to meet Dean’s gaze, widening with Dean’s words. “Yes, Cas. I love you. I think I’ve loved you from the first moment we met, the moment you saved me from Furdition.”

Dean smiles and laughs, not caring that his eyes are filled with tears. “Remember that? That stupid, mangy-ass mutt of Crowley’s? I hated that damn dog, but I owe him everything for bringing you to me.”

Dean wipes the tears from his face, and takes a deep breath. “So I know I fucked up. But what I want you to know, is that I’m going to do whatever it takes to make it up to you. I don’t care what, and I don’t care how long it takes or if I have to fucking be reincarnated a few times to do it. But it starts here, right now. You changed schools just to be closer to me, right? Well, I’m paying you back by moving to Seattle to be near you.”

Castiel tilts his head, eyes opening even wider at Dean’s words. “Dean, I—”

“No, Cas, don’t say no, okay? Just, give me a chance, please?” Dean is so scared of hearing the word no, of Castiel yelling at him and telling him to go away, that he tries to keep him from speaking at all. He steps up into Castiel’s personal space, so cautious that he almost feels like he’s trying to approach a wild animal, and places his hands at the back of Castiel’s elbows. “Cas, you’re home for me. I realized it more than ever when I went back to Lawrence. It didn’t feel right, and I couldn’t figure out why exactly it didn’t feel like home anymore, and then I just knew. It was because you weren’t there. I mean, we’re a team, right?”

Dean can feel more tears running down his cheeks, and he doesn’t give a shit about other people walking down the hallway and gawking at them. He’s just grateful Castiel doesn’t pull away, doesn’t push him down and tell him off. Cast just stares at him, watching, and Dean lets him, like so many times before. He wills Castiel to see inside him, see his heart and know that it’s true, that this time, this time, won’t be like that last time. That this time, he will do everything in his power to remain by Castiel’s side forever.

He leans further into Castiel, closing his eyes when he feels his friend’s breath against his cheek. They’re so close now, and Dean wants to close the distance, to wrap his arms around Castiel and hold on, but he’s still too afraid of going too far, so he just leans his forehead against Castiel’s, and breathes him in. He can feel the shivers running through Castiel’s body, and he aches to comfort him, but instead he waits.

He feels Castiel inhale, as shaking hands grab onto his waist and pull him closer. “You jump, I jump?” Castiel whispers against Dean’s mouth, and Dean smiles, before opening his lips and letting him in.
Epilogue

When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No I won’t be afraid
Oh, I won’t be afraid
Just as long as you stand, stand by me

-Ben E. King, “Stand By Me”

Four years later...

“Dean?”

“Ssshhh, your little slice of heaven is right here. Now either go back to sleep, or help me out with this.” Dean pulls himself closer to Castiel, scratching his nose along the hairs at the back of his friend’s neck, and nudging his morning wood against the crack of Castiel’s ass.

Castiel is silent for several moments, and Dean assumes he’s gone back to sleep until he hears words muttered against a pillow. “You’re never going to let me live down what I said in those letters, are you?”

Dean chuckles, voice deep and rough from sleep. “Nope. Never ever.” He nibbles at the jut of bone along the top of Castiel’s spine. “Now what would you say about a nice, lazy morning fuck?”

Castiel groans, burying his face further into his pillow. “I’m too sleepy to fuck.” They lie in silence for a few seconds, until Castiel adds, glancing at Dean over his shoulder, “Unless you want to be the one doing the fucking. I could get behind that, so to speak.”

Dean wraps his arm tighter around Castiel’s waist, sliding a foot between his ankles and kissing his shoulder blade. “I’m too tired to do the fucking,” he whines. “Besides, I thought you couldn’t get enough of being inside me.”

Castiel huffs, arching his back and rubbing his ass against Dean’s cock. “I think I’d rather punish you for teasing me all the time about the things I wrote after you cruelly broke my heart.”

Dean waits a couple beats, listening as Castiel’s breathing becomes slow and even again, before kissing the space between his shoulder blades. “Could you punish me while your dick is in my ass?”

Castiel lets loose a bark of laughter, and Dean smiles against the skin of his back. “I think maybe you need to look up the definition of punishment because I’m pretty sure what you’re wanting is the exact opposite of that,” Castiel teases, turning over so that he’s facing Dean. He’s smiling Dean’s favorite smile, the goofy one that’s all gums and nose crinkles, and Dean is unable to resist leaning in to capture it with his lips.

They make out for a while, all slow, lazy flicks of tongue and contented little sighs at the pulse
points of necks. The sun has barely risen, their apartment hazy from the first rays of light, and neither of them is ready to leave the warmth and coziness of their bed. Their kisses slowly subside, and eventually they both fall back asleep, legs and arms tangled together as they press close.

They wake a couple hours later, laughing and stumbling over moving boxes as they make their way into the bathroom. They take turns giving each other thoroughly satisfying blowjobs in the shower, before soaping each other up and washing the other’s hair. It’s a routine they’d not had the luxury of for most of Castiel’s college years, both of their schedules so hectic that they rarely had the opportunity to shower together, much less take their time with it.

Once they’re out of the shower, and after having spent entirely too much time making sure the other is thoroughly dried, they unpack the few remaining boxes they’d not gotten to the night before. One good thing about moving cross-country from college to real life is that you don’t tend to take along too much baggage on the trip, so it unsurprisingly doesn’t take too long to unfold their lives and begin again. Of course, it doesn’t hurt that Jody hadn’t changed anything from the way Dean had left it four years ago, so it’s not as much of an adjustment for Dean as it is Castiel.

Dean brews up a pot of coffee as he scrambles eggs and makes toast, promising to make Castiel Mary’s famous French Toast recipe just as soon as he goes to the store and stocks up their fridge. When the coffee is ready, he pours Castiel a mug, adding the obscene amount of French Vanilla creamer and sugar his friend prefers, and carries it over to Castiel, laying it on the desk beside his drawing board. He stands behind Castiel, looking over his friend's shoulder at the picture he’s working on, before leaning forward to place a kiss along that sensitive spot that Cas loves on the back of his neck.

“Hey, maybe we should have ourselves a picnic on the floor for lunch,” Dean murmurs against Castiel’s skin. “Kinda like that picnic we had inside my house the first day we met.”

Castiel exhales softly, hand pausing at his sketchboard as Dean massages the cord of muscle along his shoulder. “I’d like that,” he says. “I think we may even have the plaid blanket we used back then in one of the boxes your mother sent with us.”

They’re quiet for a few more minutes, Dean watching Castiel’s hand flow across the paper as he continues to draw. “You know,” Dean whispers against the soft hairs along the nape of Castiel’s neck, smiling when he feels Cas shiver, “you should draw me like one of your French girls.”

Castiel laughs, leaning back against Dean’s chest. “I will never understand your obsession with that movie,” Castiel teases, glancing over his shoulder. “And you realize this makes you Kate Winslet in this scenario, right?”

“Or, you could draw a picture of your dick in my ass,” Dean suggests lasciviously. “That’s a little less Kate Winslet, a little more Kate Rimslet, if you know what I’m saying.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Castiel snorts. “And you’re never gonna let that one go either, are you?”

“When it comes to your dick in my ass, it is physically, emotionally, and spiritually impossible for me to ever let that go,” Dean teases.

He grunts in displeasure when Castiel leans forward and away from him, reaching into one of his sketchbooks and thumbing through the pages. Castiel gets through most of the book before finding what he’s looking for, pulling out the drawing and handing it to Dean, a small smile on his lips. Dean looks at it, not surprised to find it’s another picture of himself, but the look on his face is
something different altogether. His eyes are partially closed, the green of his irises barely showing through his lashes, and his lips are parted in what looks to be half-smile, half-gasp.

Castiel leans in, kissing along the bolt of Dean’s jaw. “That’s the expression you make when I’m inside you, Dean.”

Dean curses, letting the page fall from his fingers as he pulls Castiel back to their bed, unbuckling his pants, and alternating between daring and begging Castiel to put that expression on his face again.

The move to Chattanooga was a spur of the moment decision, the only real motivation behind it being Dean feeling as if he’d left it too soon. Since Castiel’s minor in graphic design affords him some flexibility on where to live, they agree that for the time being, Dean’s success at his job in Chattanooga trumps Castiel’s desire to live in a city where he can find galleries willing to display his art.

Castiel soon realizes that even though they’re in the South, he can still find galleries that will give him a chance, especially in the nearby city of Atlanta. It’s not New York City or Los Angeles, but it’s good enough for getting his name out there, for now. His freelance jobs keep him so busy that he hardly has time for drawing on his own, and most of that spare time is spent sketching the graphic novel that he and Dean are trying to create together.

Dean is taking creative writing classes a couple nights a week, building onto the knowledge he gained from the few courses he audited in Seattle. The writing is slow-going, mostly because when he’s not working, his spare time is spent with Castiel, and when he’s not with Castiel he’s thinking about Castiel. Sometimes he wonders if he will ever grow out of this high school draw-doodles-and-hearts-around-their-names-together phase of their relationship, but deep down, he kind of hopes he doesn’t.

It’s a good life that Dean and Castiel are weaving together. They make no long-term plans because they want to make things up as they go. The one permanent thing both Dean and Castiel agree on is to stay by each other’s side, no matter what. Because they will never stop needing each other, and wanting to be the last person the other talks to at night, and the first person they see in the morning. Because they’re family, and that’s how it’s always been, from the first moment they met.

We’re a team, right?

You jump, I jump.

The End
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