Painted Angels

by WinJennster

Summary

Author Castiel Novak has finally hit the big time, with a book based on his failed college relationship with a brilliant painter. He's put all his pain behind him, but at a book signing, he comes face to face with Dean Winchester for the first time in twelve years, and the reunion doesn't go like Cas hoped. Dean's a broken man, with a lot of scars and secrets, shoulders weighed down by his demons and self loathing. Cas sees a second chance with the man he's never stopped loving, but Dean's moved on, and is about to get married. Sam launches a "brilliant" plan to reunite his brother and his best friend, but Cas is worried it will all blow up in their faces, and he'll go through the agony of losing Dean a second time.

Notes
Yeah it's new fic. I was inspired by a meme on tumblr with Misha sitting signing autographs with a starbucks cup in hand. It spawned this. I hope you enjoy. Forgive the indulgence of using Baltimore. I couldn't help myself and they can't always be in goddamn Lawrence right?

*edit 1/24/2019* just had to add this little note. I can't believe so many people are still reading this old boy, and leaving comments and kudos. I see you. I see all of you and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. It might sound silly, but PA and the time stamps remain my greatest creative accomplishment and I so appreciate all of you.

Love,
Jenn

This is the meme that inspired the story.

Title for chapter from a Frank Zappa song.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Baltimore, Maryland.

It'd been a long time since he'd been there, but since the book was based in Charm City, it made perfect sense that his editor sent him back for a book signing.

Everything was right there.
The little café.
The hole-in-the-wall pub.
The tattoo joint where they'd gotten matching tattoos.
The killer second hand clothes shop.
The record store.

All the places that held his memories, memories of the happiest time of his life.

He hadn't been that happy since.

And as he walked into the beautiful steampunk-esque Barnes and Noble in Harbor Place, Castiel Novak couldn't help but feel like he'd come full circle.

The place was mobbed, and there was loud applause as he walked in. He was led up to the second floor on the incredible glass escalators, and he took in the copper plated chimneys that used to be part of the former power plant. When he was a child, about eight or ten or something, the first renovation of the power plant had included an odd little carnival slash amusement park. He remembered the one exhibit, it was foggy in his memory, but it had included a giant sarcophagus, more like a humongous Pandora's box, and creepy music, and then animated ghost and goblins had swept about the room.

It was creepy. The whole place was creepy.

The bookstore was much better.

Sweeping high ceilings and neatly organized shelves, bright lighting and genuine antique fixtures, and of course, the requisite Starbucks, this particular Barnes and Noble was lovely, and he felt a buzz of excitement sweep over him.

This was his hometown after all. Where he'd grown up and gone to college and made his first adult friends, where he'd fallen in love and…

He derailed that thought pretty quickly.

Cas was led to a large area where chairs filled with people were neatly lined up, and a table with his book, *Painted Angels*, was on display. When the crowd caught sight of him, there was another round of applause, and the manager of the store raised her hands for quiet.

"It's my pleasure and privilege to introduce Maryland native, Castiel Novak, author of the New York Times bestseller *Painted Angels*. We're incredibly excited to have him here today. Castiel will be answering questions about the book and signing copies afterward. So without further ado, please give a warm welcome to Castiel Novak!"

There was another round of applause, and Castiel smiled at his audience.
He wasn't surprised to see so many same-sex couples in the crowd; after all, his book was the first same-sex romance to gross such high sales and become a total crossover success. There was a movie in the works, and some were predicting it would be as big of a success as *Brokeback Mountain*.

Cas read a short passage from the book, then opened the floor for questions.

A pretty girl in the front row with hot pink dreads raised her hand and Cas smiled and pointed to her. "Yes, miss?"

"Hi, I was wondering who Dean is?"

The blood drained from his face. He'd had no trouble answering this question in the other cities on his book tour and it was always asked, and he wasn't sure why it was bothering him now. Maybe it was the proximity to his old life.

The dedication in the front of the book read *For Dean, Always*, so someone at each signing inevitably asked who he was. But here, just a breath's away from his memories, Cas found himself choking on the words. He took a deep breath and steeled his shoulders.

"Dean is, was, the inspiration for the character of David in the book. I was the inspiration for Carver. The book is based on the relationship I had in college."

Another hand raised. "Are you still together?"

Castiel sighed. "No. Carver and David got their happy ending. Dean and Castiel didn't."

"What happened?"

"Uh…well, Dean…he had some personal issues...with the relationship and uh…Dean wasn't…he wasn't able to…" Cas trailed off, staring into space for a moment. "I'm sorry, I'd honestly rather not talk about that."

Another hand raised in the back. "Was the real Dean a painter as well?"

"Yes. An extremely talented one. He was accepted to the Maryland Institute on a full scholarship. His specialty, like David's in the book, was incredible, massive, mixed media paintings of angels. When I met him, he was in the middle of four pieces, each ten feet tall by five feet wide. Each one depicted an archangel; Michael, Gabriel, Lucifer, and Raphael. He mixed paint with unusual found objects such as car parts, nails, glass, broken pieces of tile and wood. I remember he'd made Michael's halo out of a hubcap. They were…amazing. Transcendent. To this day, I've seen nothing like them." Cas couldn't help the wistful tone in his voice.

"Are all the places in the book real places? Do those people really exist?"

Cas smiled, remembering friendly places and beloved faces. People he hasn't seen in years. "Yes. I changed the names of the people and places, but if you're a tried and true 'Bawlmer' native, you could probably figure out which neighborhood it is."

"Have you seen Dean since then?"

"No. I haven't. I doubt he wants to see me."

"Ok, I think that's enough questions for now," the perky manager smiled out at the crowd. "Let's go ahead and set up for the book signing!"
Over the next hour, Cas signed and posed for pictures with the fans. He heard many heartening stories about how David's character helped someone else come to terms with their own sexuality, how the book helped a young lesbian's parent's accept her and her girlfriend as a couple. It was stories like that that made Cas smile. He'd never imagined when he started writing *Painted Angels* that the book would have such an impact.

He signed and signed and signed, and towards the end of the hour, his Starbucks cup was empty, his right hand was slightly cramped, and he wasn't quite looking up at everyone that came to the table.

The last person in line was wearing jeans and a green denim jacket. An incredibly tattered copy of the book was set down in front of him, open to the dedication page.

Cas read the script, the familiar *For Dean, Always* making his stomach twinge. "Who do I make it out to?" he asked, unable to tear his eyes from the words.

The voice was deep, but quiet, hesitant, and the answer was simple.

"To Dean."

He'd almost turned around three times that Saturday morning.

It was cold out, and he was behind on his lesson plans for the coming week, and there were things he needed to do at the house. He kept finding more and more excuses, but come noon, Dean Winchester found himself parking the Impala in a downtown parking garage, making his way across Pratt Street and into the bookstore.

He followed the trail of excited chatter up to the second floor, coming around the corner just in time to hear his voice, same gravelly inflection that still haunted his dreams. Dean clutched his tattered copy of *Painted Angels* in his sweaty palm.

His breath caught in his lungs.

Twelve years later, and he could still remember how those lips tasted.

Cas looked amazing, in a black V-neck sweater over an olive plaid button down and tight black jeans. His face was a little older maybe, but he was just as beautiful as Dean remembered.

His cheeks flushed at that thought, and he again felt the urge to run, but instead, he forced himself into a seat in the back of the crowd. Dean pulled his Chevy ball cap down over his eyes, praying that Cas wouldn't notice him sitting all the way in the back.

Dean almost got up and left several times, his cheeks catching fire repeatedly, listening to Castiel talk about their relationship and then waxing poetic about his paintings.

He didn't paint anymore. Not like that. Hadn't in a long time, in fact.

Then, they wrapped everything up, and folks got in line for autographs. His stomach danced, butterflies doing a wild fandango. Dean felt like he was going to throw up. He ran. He found a bathroom and he hid in there for forty-five minutes. Then he skulked around the shelves near the autograph table.

Finally, there was only one person left in line.

Screwing his courage to the wall, he slid into line behind her, opening his book to the page. That
He almost left the line, and then it was his turn. He was the only one left.

Cas didn't look up, and Dean slid the book onto the table with shaking hands, then reached up and slid the ball cap off.

"Who do I make it out to?" Cas asked quietly, tiredness in his voice.

He took a deep breath, and responded, "To Dean."

He looked exactly the same. Same freckles. Same plush, full lips. Same sparkling green eyes.

He'd gotten lost in those eyes once. There were crinkles in the corners now, but age had been kind, and all Castiel could do was stare up at him.

"Dean…" Cas whispered. He couldn't tear his eyes from him. The other man smiled, slightly sheepish.

"Hey, Cas," he replied quietly.

"Wait, wait, wait, is this him? Is this the Dean?" Castiel's agent, Becky Rosen, squealed in his ear.

"Yes, this is the Dean."

Dean blushed, soft pink blooming across his cheekbones. God, Castiel had forgotten he blushed easily.

Meanwhile, Becky had moved around the table and was practically shaking Dean's hand off. "Oh my god, I'm so happy to meet you, I've heard so much about you, but you don't look like he described David in the book, but that's ok, you're so handsome anyway, although David in the book is more my type, but oh my god, you're here, you're really here…"

"Becky!"

"Yeah, Cas?"

"Take a breath."

She giggled, "Sorry. I'm just excited."

Castiel smiled indulgently at her, and closed Dean's book. "Dean," he said, as he stood. "Let me buy you a cup of coffee. If that's ok?"

"Yeah," the other man said, cheeks pinking again, "that would be cool."

"Starbucks ok?" he asked, handing back the book.

"Sure. It's convenient right?" Dean chuckled. He took the book and turned and walked away, towards the Starbucks in the store, and as Cas watched him go, he couldn't help but remember the first time he met him.
Castiel Novak stood in front of the former firehouse, double checking the piece of paper in his hand. The big doors were thrown open, and Led Zeppelin's *Travelin' Riverside Blues* drifted out into the street. Robert Plant was imploring someone to squeeze his lemon, and over that, another voice could be heard singing along with him.

Checking the address, he ascertained, that yes, he was in the right place, and stepped in through the open doorway.

Large scaffolding was set up along the back wall of what must have been the engine bay once upon a time, and leaning up against a wall was an enormous canvas. There was a man on top of the scaffold, the source of the voice singing along with the vinyl record he spied on a turntable sitting on a cluttered workbench.

He was wearing nothing save a pair of ratty paint stained jeans and a red bandana around his head, sweat dripping down the freckled planes of his back. There was a set of wings tattooed there, the feathers trailing down his back and down his arms to the very tops of his wrists. They moved with the muscles of his back and arm. There were more inked designs meandering into his jeans and Castiel's mouth went dry at the thought of following those patterns down into his pants.

He seemed completely oblivious to Castiel's presence, singing and wiping swathes of red paint across the top of his canvas with his bare hand.

Castiel was transfixed.

"Castiel?" a deep voice called from nearby. A young black man stepped out of the stairwell to his left, a smile on his face. "Vic Henrikson. You're here about the roommate ad?" He offered his hand, and Castiel took it, returning the hearty handshake.

"Yes. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too man. By the way," he said, waving absently over his shoulder, "that's Dean, but he's in the zone right now, so we'll talk to him later. He don't hear shit when he's in painting mode. C'mon upstairs and I'll show you around."

"Ok," Castiel said easily, sparing one last look at the man on the scaffolding before following Vic up the stairs.

The upstairs of the firehouse was big and roomy. There was an industrial kitchen with a breakfast bar, a huge TV on one wall, and a state of the art stereo system. A big sectional couch and a couple of recliners were parked in front of it. A baby grand piano sat under one window, a couple of guitars flanking it.

"So this is the main room, used to be the bunk area and kitchen of the fire house. There's three bedrooms, the middle one is Dean's," Vic pointed to the one on the far left, "that one's mine, and the one in the front would be yours. And then we all share the bathroom, which is huge too, cause y'know, firemen. Dean and I each claimed a toilet stall, and you can do that too. There's another bathroom downstairs, but it's just a couple toilets and a sink."

"It's a huge space," Castiel said, taking everything in. He peeked into the bedroom Vic indicated would be his. It was spacious and airy. There were big windows along the front wall of the firehouse, and built in bookshelves with a roomy closet on the left hand side. It was damn near perfect. "Are you sure the rent's only $350 a month?"
"Yup. Dean sold a big set of paintings last year and made a ton of money off it, so he bought this place outright. He brings in roommates 'cause he don't really like being alone, and the rent helps with his utilities and art supplies. He's on a full scholarship at MICA so he don't worry about payin' for school or nothing."

"Wow."

Vic sighed. "There's one more thing. Dean ain't exactly easy to live with."

"How so?"

"Well...he can be kind of...weird. He's an artist, y'know? He gets in this weird space where he eats, breathes, and sleeps his paintings. Hell, sometimes he don't sleep or eat at all. I've seen him go a couple of days without sleep, just paint paint paint. And his type of art is unusual. He's a mixed-media artist, so he brings weird shit home. He's loud. He likes his music. And he stress bakes sometimes. And then he'll sit up playing piano all night. He's weird dude. We've had trouble keeping roommates. He don't bother me at all, I'm used to him, but..."

"An artist that stress bakes and plays music? Where's the downside? I have four brothers. They're all weird. I can deal with Dean's weirdness. Believe me. The space is fantastic, the rent is good, and it's close to campus. I'm in."

A big smile lit up Vic's face. "Great! That's great!"

"When can I move in?"

"First month's rent, dude, and whenever you got a minute. The room's ready to go, and hell, we'll help you carry stuff up the steps."

"Excellent. I'll bring you the cash tomorrow and I'd like to move in Saturday if that's ok?"

"Ok? It's great! Dude, welcome to Remington!"

"Remington?"

"Yeah, man, this part of B-more is called Remington or Mount Vernon, but we stick with Remington. You ain't from Maryland?"

"Yes, but from up around Hereford, close to the Pennsylvania border. My family never much cared for the city."

"Oh, dude. Well, we'll have to educate you in the finer points of city living."

"Sounds good."

"Yup," Vic moved towards the stairwell, "let's head downstairs, and I'll try and introduce you to our fearless leader, if I can snap him out of Picasso mode for a minute."

Back down in the engine bay, Castiel took in the space. He could see the door to the bathroom, but everything else was clearly Dean's studio.

In one corner were some large wooden crates, appearing to hold all sorts of car parts; hubcaps, hood ornaments, and other stuff. There was a Rubbermaid tote full of broken glass, another full of broken chunks of tile, yet another with stones of various sizes. There were metal pieces leaning up against walls, strange fixtures and architectural elements spread around the floor.
Closer to the front door was a large tan canvas sheet covering something car-shaped, something big and car-shaped, and Castiel could see a tire and a flash of chrome underneath.

The music had changed, a loud electric guitar riff, and Jimi Hendrix's Foxy Lady echoed off the cinderblock walls. Dean was down a level on the scaffold, hand covered in angry red paint, leaving splotches and smears along the canvas.

"Yo, Dean!" Vic called. Dean jumped slightly, and turned.

Castiel's breath caught in his throat.

The most beautiful man he'd ever seen was glaring down at him and Vic, grass green eyes sparkling in the reflected sunlight, plush pink lips pulled into a scowl. He had a smear of red paint over his right eyebrow.

"What? I'm busy."

"No kiddin', asshat, but this guy here's just agreed to be our new roommate. Think you could act like a human for a minute?"

Dean's eyes swept over Castiel, making him feel hot all over. He grabbed a rag and wiped the red paint from his hand, then made a graceful leap off the scaffold, grabbing onto the brass fire pole in mid-air, gliding smoothly to the ground.

"Showoff," Vic muttered.

He strode across the floor towards them, all loose and easy movements, noticeable swagger in his stride, but it didn't look forced, it just looked natural on him.

Dean held his hand out, and Castiel noticed that there was still some red paint, but he didn't care, taking Dean's hand anyway. "Dean Winchester, I own this here artistic circus." Vic snorted, and Dean glared at him. "Shuddup, Victor."

"Whatever. This is Castiel Novak, Dean."

Green eyes lit up. "Castiel? That's an angelic name, right? Angel of Thursday?"

"Yes," Castiel replied, instantly impressed, "how did you know?" His eyes swept over Dean's bare chest, taking in even more tattoos, one of which was a star surrounded by flames on the upper part of his left pectoral.

"Dude, angels are like, I dunno, my thing," he indicated the canvas behind him. "That's Lucifer. He's part of a series, I'm doing the archangels. Lucifer, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael."

Castiel couldn't help himself. He snorted. Dean whirled back towards him, a stormy look on his face.

"Why is that funny?" he demanded.

"No, it's not, not really. It's just that my parents are incredibly religious. I have brothers with those names."

Dean stared a moment, as if trying to work out whether or not Castiel was messing with him. "Dude, your family's weird," he said finally.

"Tell me something I don't know," Castiel replied with a smile.
Dean threw his head back and laughed. "You're alright, Cas. You're alright."

Three days later, Castiel become a part of Dean's world, and his life changed forever.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to endversedean.tumblr.com for the gorgeous cover art!!!
Burned Bridges

"So, New York Times bestseller? Pretty awesome, Cas," Dean smiled across the small table as he sipped his black coffee.

"I was surprised by the book's success," Castiel admitted. "I think it's because my main character is so likable." He smiled back at Dean, and the other man's cheeks tinged pink again.

"I dunno about that," Dean said quietly, setting his coffee down and fiddling with the hat on his head.

"David's a lot like you. All the best parts of your personality."

"Yeah, but the height, hair and muscles? You totally described Sam."

Cas chuckled. "Yes. I did have Sam in mind. And I described myself like Victor."

"Yup, I noticed that."

He took another sip of his latte. "How are they? Sam and Victor?"

"Well Vic's down in DC, working at the FBI, profiling or something like that. He just got married last year. Sammy's still single, but happy as hell. He's in DC too, works as a researcher at the Smithsonian. They actually pay him to bury his nose in old books."

"Dear god, does he ever leave?" Cas asked with a smile.

Dean chuckled. "Occasionally. He looks the part, hair longer than ever, reading glasses, ratty tweed jacket with elbow patches... he's in Sammy heaven down there. He's got this perfect little condo, just loaded with old books and I swear, sometimes he forgets there's a world outside the door. Sometimes I manage to drag him away for dinner or a ball game or something. He always manages to get his gym time in though. He's the nutty professor but he's built like The Rock or something."

Cas chuckled, swirling the remains of the liquid in his cup.

"How's your family?"

"Better. Things are... better. My father is his usual pleasant self, and my mother is still nutty as ever, and I'm still not really talking to Lucifer, but it's been... since the book was released, and they all read it, they've come to understand me more. Mom calls me a lot still, but she's not so critical of me now. She's much more pleasant. I still see Gabriel the most. We took a vacation to Tijuana over the summer and that was quite a bit of fun, although he still lacks the ability to 'keep it in his pants' which can be very embarrassing at times."

Dean threw his head back to laugh, and Cas's eyes trailed the column of his throat. "Sounds like Gabe. Remember, he tried picking Pam up that one time? She wasn't having it."

"No, she wasn't. Pam was always a feisty one. And of course, he was always tormenting Sam." He took a last sip of his coffee then sat the empty cup on the table. "Do you still see them? The old crowd? I think about them often."

The other man stared down at the table, and reached up to scratch the back of his neck. "No, not really. I'm pretty busy these days. I live out in the County, and just... don't have much time."
"Still painting?"

Dean laughed again, but it wasn't a real laugh, it was forced, and it was bitter around the edges. "Not really. I teach. I teach art at Parkville High."

"An art teacher? You always were good with kids, so that's not surprising, but Dean, you had jobs lined up. Commissions. What happened?"

He wouldn't meet Cas's eyes. Dean just stared into his coffee, like the half empty cup held all the answers.

"You left."

The air left Cas's lungs in a rush, and he realized, this was it. This was why Dean had sought him out. This was their second chance, the big do-over, and as the other man continued staring into his cup, Castiel felt the first warm stirrings of hope inside him, blooming like morning glories at sunrise.

Dean was the one who'd gotten away. Never mind that Cas was the one that left. Dean slipped through his fingers pure and simple, and this was their second chance.

"Let me take you to dinner. Please?"

Startled, Dean looked up, and blinked, but didn't meet Castiel's eyes. "Cas…"

"We can start over. Get to know each other again?" Castiel kept his tone light, casual, not wanting to spook Dean.

"Cas." Dean fidgeted, playing with the cup in his hand. "I can't. I'm…I'm…"

"What?" Cas asked him softly.

There was pain in green irises, when he finally let his eyes meet Cas's, then he stood abruptly. "I'm getting married. In four weeks." Dean snatched his jacket off the chair. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come."

And just like that, the moment was gone, the mood shattered, and then Dean was gone as well, disappearing into the Saturday evening crowd, vanishing before Castiel could even begin to comprehend what had just happened, his tattered copy of Painted Angels the only evidence that he'd ever been there at all.

He got in the Impala and just drove, upset and preoccupied, and wasn't at all surprised when he found himself in front of Sam's condo. Sam answered before Dean even knocked, reading glasses holding back his long hair. "Thank god. Anna's been calling everyone and you didn't answer your phone."

Dean patted his pockets, pulling the phone out of his jacket. The screen was blank, and didn't respond when he pushed the buttons. "Guess the battery's dead?" He poked at it again.

"Where the hell did you go anyway? She said you were acting all cagey."

"Went somewhere I shouldn't have," he muttered. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah," Sam held the door open for him, stepping to the side to let him in. As usual, every available surface was covered with books, fiction, non-fiction, modern, historical, it was a mix of everything, and it was very Sam. His Macbook sat glowing in the middle of his dining room table, surrounded
on all sides by texts of various sizes, shapes, and ages.

All the books made him realize, with a pang, that he'd left his copy of Cas's book on the table in Starbucks. He felt inexplicably sad. Sure, he could buy another copy, just that one…that one was his.

"Somewhere you shouldn't have gone. Anything to do with this?" Sam tossed the Arts and Entertainment section of the Baltimore Sun on the coffee table, the page folded open to a full color picture of Cas, and details about the book signing. Sam was watching him, as he pulled his jacket off, dropping it over a chair.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Yes."

Dean sighed, and sank into the couch. "Well, it was a dumb idea. A really dumb idea." He ran a hand through his hair. "Can I stay here tonight? I'm not ready to go home."

"No, you're not ready to face Anna. But yeah, call me crazy, you can stay here tonight. Wanna get Chinese?"

"Sure."

"I'm guessing there's no way in hell I'm gonna get you to talk about this?"

Dean snorted. "Yeah. Not gonna happen."

"Fine." Sam tossed him a phone. "At least call Anna and let her know where you are. I've got a spare phone charger around here somewhere."

He stared at the phone, finally dialing Anna's number with a sigh. She picked up on the first ring.

"Sam? Have you heard from him?"

"No, it's…it's me."

"Oh my god, Dean! I've been trying to call you for hours! Where is your phone?"

Dean squirmed. "I'm sorry, the battery died. Didn't have a charger in the Impala."

"Why are you at Sam's? We had a date tonight, remember?"

"I'm sorry, babe, I guess I forgot."

Anna grew quiet, and he could picture her tapping her index finger against her bottom lip, trying to figure out what the hell was wrong with her fiancé this time.

"Are you ok?" she finally asked.

"Yeah, probably just a case of pre-wedding jitters, right?"

"Yeah…" Anna sighed. "So we're off for tonight?"

"If that's ok? I could leave now…"

"No, maybe you just need some brother bonding time or something." He could hear her forcing
cheerfulness into her voice, and it bugged him. It bugged him that he brought her to this.

"I'm sorry, Anna. I really am."

"It's ok." She sighed very softly again. "You'd tell me if there was something going on with you, right?"

Dean let his head loll against the back of the sofa, staring up at the ceiling. "Yeah, babe, I would."

"Ok," she replied, and Dean could hear her smile. She believed him. And that made him feel guilty as hell for the lie. "So, I'll see you tonight? Or are you staying?"

"Yeah, we're gonna get Chinese and watch a movie or something. I'll see you in the morning, baby."

"Ok," she said again, more forced cheerfulness. "I love you."

"I know," he said quietly, and shut off the phone. He sat up, laid the phone on the coffee table and buried his face in his hands.

He felt Sam sit down next to him, heard the beer bottles being set on the table. His brother handed him a spare set of sweats to sleep in. Sam, being his usual intuitive self, didn't say anything, just flipped the TV on. The Chinese came, and they ate quietly. Sam's presence was reassuring, and as they watched the movie, Dean drifted further and further into his brother's space, the weight of the day bearing down on him. At one point he blinked awake, and his head was on a pillow in Sam's lap, his brother's fingers idly rubbing his scalp, just like he had done for Sam when they were children and Sam had a nightmare.

Normally, Dean wouldn't allow it, the gesture being entirely too touchy-feely for him, but it'd been a long day. He was tired, and emotionally drained. He simply did not have it in him to care. It was warm and comforting, and he dozed off again.

He dreamt of blue eyes, of skin on skin and murmured words, half-formed breaths in the dark, fingers on his hips, and oil paint. He dreamt in bright colors and blurry images. He dreamt of broken glass and piano keys and the smell of beer and linseed oil.

Dean sat up with a gasp on Sam's couch, the room dark, Sam gone, and he was covered with a fleece blanket. His shirt was glued to his skin with sweat and his hands were shaking.

He'd like to say it had been years since he dreamt of the old days, but it wasn't. It had been just a few days. The dreams had increased in frequency after he'd read the book and they'd picked up even more since the announcement of the book signing.

Running a hand down his face, he pulled himself off the couch and wandered into the kitchen.

There was no more beer in Sam's fridge, just wine and asstons of fruit and veggies and some incredibly unappealing looking chicken. He snatched a bottle of water and grumbled under his breath as he opened it, walking through the condo until he stood at the balcony doors.

Fat snowflakes drifted lazily to the ground. Dean was surprised; he didn't know snow was in the forecast. But then, he hadn't been paying attention to much of anything since he saw the ad for the book signing. Even his students had noticed he was only half there during the course of the week.

For some reason, the kids liked him, and had tried cheering him up, even dragging some of the other teachers in on it. In the end, he'd done what he always did - faked it. It worked, mostly.
The snow was mesmerizing, but his thoughts were million miles away, and he just couldn't get Cas's face out of his mind.

**September 2000**

"So that's Benny's. That's where we all drink. And then Roadhouse Café, that's Ellen and Bobby's place, they're a couple old farts that love me like a son, so I don't pay for shit. Sometimes I play guitar or something in there, and I make them keep all the tips, and sometimes I'll work a shift at the grill. I won't let 'em pay me nothing." Dean pointed across Remington Avenue to another store front, with the words _Death Threads_ over the picture window, and some vintage clothes hanging around.

"That's Tessa's joint, she sells awesome old clothes. Got this super awesome Zep shirt there last week. She's hot, by the way. Next to her place is Pam's place, Psychic Ink. She's also crazy hot. Sometimes I work there too, and she did all the work on me. Then Retro Records is run by a coupla stoners, Andy and Ash. They're awesome and actually carry vinyl, dude."

Cas nodded, eyes sweeping the street. Music echoed down Remington, guitars and a snare drum, a couple of people just hanging around in the street singing.

A Saturday afternoon in the neighborhood always made Dean happy. He loved his neighborhood and never wanted to leave, which was why he bought the firehouse in the first place. He loved the vibe, and the people, and how close he was to school.

Vic was a great friend, a great roommate, Benny was his adopted brother, Bobby and Ellen his adopted parents, hell, everyone was family. He was several hundred miles from home, and even though he missed his brother, Sammy, something awful, he was out on his own, doing what he wanted.

Despite his damn dad.

The man next to him smiled as they walked down the street, back towards the Roadhouse. With any luck, Jo would be off doing something else, and he and Cas could have breakfast in peace and get to know each other a bit.

Cas was a mystery, and Dean had, up until this point, been too busy with Lucifer to have a moment to talk to his new roommate.

That morning, he'd woken up and simply decided he would take some time to show Cas around and talk with the guy. He knew he'd probably made one hell of an impression already, being completely absorbed in his archangel project, busy attaching the glass shards to the canvas. It was annoying, and horribly time consuming, but it was going to be worth it in the end.

Dean pushed open the door to the Roadhouse, not at all surprised to find Benny already holding court at a table, Ellen resting her hand on his shoulder as she refilled his coffee. Bobby was at the grill, happily flipping pancakes and humming to himself, trucker cap firmly in place per usual. His old buddy, Rufus, was sitting at the bar, working his way through a big stack of pancakes and a Baltimore Sun Sports section, bitching and moaning about the Ravens to anybody who would listen.

Jo was nowhere to be seen, Dean thought happily, as he slid into his favorite booth. Cas sat across from him, reaching for the menu Dean was handing him.

"So, we're not far from Mount Vernon here, and the art museum's not too far either. I go there sometimes for inspiration. I like the Renaissance painters, and the medieval angel paintings. I mean, mine are really different from say, Michelangelo, but still, there's inspiration there. And when we've
got some free time, I'll take you down to the Visionary Art museum in Federal Hill. I've actually got a piece in there now. Love that place."

Cas nodded, still staring at the menu. Ellen sidled over, put her hand on Dean's shoulder, tapping it. He got the idea and slid over so Ellen could plop down on the bench.

"Hey there, kiddo. Who's this?" she asked pleasantly.

"My new roommate," Dean announced proudly, "Castiel Novak."

Ellen smiled and stretched her hand over the table, and Cas shook it. "Nice to meet you sugar. I am sorry about your accommodations; this one ain't easy to live with."

"Hey," Dean protested.

"Is for horses. Castiel? Would you like some coffee?"

Cas smiled, his blue eyes twinkling. "Yes, ma'am, thank you."

"Don't you yes ma'am me. But you could teach Dean here some of your nice manners."

"Hey!" Dean exclaimed again.

"It's the truth. You want coffee too?"

"Yes, please," Dean smirked.

"See, was that so hard?"

Dean didn't answer her and she left to fetch their coffee.

"I like her," Cas smiled.

"Me, too," Dean answered honestly. "She's good to me."

Ellen returned with their coffee and took their orders; pancakes, eggs, and bacon for Dean, and pancakes and sausage for Cas.

"So where you from?" Dean asked when she'd left again.

"Up around Hereford, close to the PA line. You?"

"Tiny little town about fifteen minutes west of Charleston, West Virginia. Hicksville, USA. I hated it. Couldn't wait to get out. I was born in Lawrence, Kansas, but my mom...we left when I was really little, and my dad moved us around a lot, and we just ended up there." Dean picked up his coffee cup, and took a long drag.

"And you're a student at the Maryland Institute?"

"Yup," Dean said proudly. "Built a solid portfolio in high school and managed to get a full ride, which is great, because Dad wasn't...well he didn't want to pay for art school, that's for damn sure."

Dean would never forget the day he told John Winchester he wanted to study art. That had been an interesting day, notable for the fact he discovered many new words in his father's vocabulary and acquired a new scar on his scalp. At least his hair hid it.
"I'm on a full scholarship too, but my parents would have paid. They approve of me majoring in English I guess."

"UMBC, right?"

"Yes," Cas said, sipping his coffee. "Vic goes there too, right?"

"Yeah, Criminal Justice major. You'd never know he's got a future as a cop when you see him drink though!" Dean chuckled. He was just about to ask Cas about his family when his plate was unceremoniously dropped onto the table, his bacon bouncing off the edge.

"What the…" He looked up, into a set of flashing, angry brown eyes.

"You think you're funny?" Jo snarled, anger pinking the tops of her cheeks.

"Uhhh," Dean stammered, looking across the table at Cas, who was watching in bemusement, his own plate having been politely set in front of him. "Um, Jo, this is Cas, my new room…"

"I don't care. I'm pissed. You had no right, Dean Winchester!"

"Jo, look, I'm sure I did something pretty stupid, since that's the norm for me anyway, but seriously I have no idea…"

"You seriously don't know?" Fury danced in her eyes, and she flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "You. Are. An. Asshole." And with that, she spun on her heel, stalking away from the table, completely ignoring Benny's request for more coffee.

He met Benny's eyes, finding a twinkle there as his friend grinned and winked at him.

"What was that all about?" Cas asked.

"Hell if I know. That woman's crazy." Dean dug into his breakfast, and he and Cas shared a companionable silence as they ate. Benny swung by the table and introduced himself, as did Bobby and Rufus, and Ellen said she had no clue what Jo's deal was, and that he was on his own.

They left a little while later, bellies full, and Dean was already covered in paint and surrounded by Lucifer's glass pieces before he realized he had told Cas a bunch of stuff about himself, but hadn't gotten much out of Cas at all.

He smiled, and smeared a little bit of red on Lucifer's forehead, mentally resolving to get Cas to Benny's that night, get him good and drunk, and pump the man for all his secrets.

Castiel Novak fascinated him. And he had no idea why.
September 2000

Dear god, he was shirtless again.

Cas watched as Dean stretched his arm towards the top of the Lucifer canvas, the ink feathers tattooed on his back fluttering with the movement of his muscles. The jeans he had on slipped down farther, dangerously close to showing off more of him than Castiel was prepared to deal with.

Led Zeppelin's *Houses of the Holy* echoed in the engine bay, loud to the point that it was hurting his ears a bit.

Dean had a paint-stained Baltimore Ravens ball cap on backwards and was soaked in sweat. He was painstakingly affixing shards of glass to the area above Lucifer's head. The glass arched over the angel, forming something like a halo.

He was completely unaware of Cas's presence, standing there with his Schwinn and his book bag, mesmerized by the movements of the man on the scaffold.

"Don't bug him. He'll get pissy."

The voice came from behind him, and he turned to see Jo standing there, a wistful expression on her face.

"I thought you were mad at him."

"I am. But Mom sent me up with dinner for him or he won't eat. He's a little ridiculous when he gets this close to being done with a painting. Anyway," she handed him a bag, "it's a bacon cheeseburger and fries, and a piece of apple pie. Just set it up there, he'll find it eventually." She turned to leave.

"Jo?"

"Yeah?" she asked, turning back with a flip of her blonde hair.

"Why are you mad at him?"

Her face turned stormy. "That is so not any of your business. Let's just say, that boy can't keep it in his pants." She flounced out of the engine bay, and didn't look back.

Cas sighed and set the bag down on one of the upended crates. He leaned his bike up against the car-shaped expanse of tan canvas and slid out of the straps of his book bag, setting it down near the bike. Then he grabbed the bag again and started the awkward one-handed climb up the scaffold.

Dean didn't notice him. At all. He was deeply immersed in attaching the glass and singing along with Robert Plant.

"Dean," Cas said softly, not wanting to spook him. Dean jumped a bit anyway, then turned with a scowl, the pissed-off look fading into a grin when he saw Cas.

"Food?" he asked, smiling down at the bag.

"Yes."
'Awesome!' Dean wiped his hands on a rag, then motioned for Cas to set the bag down. He did, and turned to go. "Dude stay. You hungry? I guarantee Ellen sent me two burgers and a fuckton of fries. Sit down and eat with me."

"Ok. I'll go grab a couple of beers first."

"That's a plan. Grab the ketchup too."

Cas nodded, then shimmied back down the scaffold. Upstairs, he snagged the beers and the ketchup. He was on his way back down the stairs when he spied the fire pole.

He'd been living in the firehouse for almost two weeks and still hadn't been brave enough to try it.

A thrill of daring swept through him. He stashed the beer cans in the pockets of his worn cargo pants, and shoved the ketchup into his back pocket. He took a deep breath and grabbed the pole.

He shrieked as he slid down, the ride a little faster than he was expecting, and he landed hard but triumphant.

"Ha! I was wondering when you'd get ballsy enough to try that." Dean called down from the top of the scaffold.

"That was…exhilarating."

Dean laughed. "Get up here, man, these burgers aren't going to eat themselves."

Cas was still giddy and laughing when he reached the top of the scaffold. Dean was sitting cross legged and had the foam take out box opened, the contents carefully divided. "I don't know why she sends me so much food. I mean, I can eat, but two double cheeseburgers? She's gonna send me to an early grave!" He grabbed a burger out of the box. "Eat up, man."

Castiel plopped down across from him, opened his beer and pulled his own burger out, moaning happily around the first bite of juicy, cheesy, bacon-y joy.

"Really like your burgers, huh?"

He nodded. "These make me very happy."

"I can see that."

"Mmm. My parents, well my mom, don't go in for this type of food. I gained almost thirty pounds freshman year. Burgers and fries and pizza and chips and cupcakes. I kinda went a little bit nuts."

"Pie?"

"Dear god, yes, I love pie."

Dean's grin was blinding. "Me too. Pie is my favorite."

They munched in silence for a while, Dean staring up at his canvas, and Castiel studying the tattoo on the lower left-hand side of Dean's chest.

It was beautiful woman, blonde curls surrounding her softly smiling face and green eyes shaped like Dean's. She had a halo over her head and ethereal white wings spread behind her. Along the bottom hem of her white gown was a banner with the initials MW and the dates 12-5-54 to 11-2-83.
He was staring long enough that he didn't realize Dean was staring back at him. "That's my mom," he said quietly. Cas jumped, unprepared for his voice. "She died when I was little." He looked down at the tattoo, absently running his hand down it. "She was my first angel," he said softly. "The first one I painted."

"She's beautiful."

"She was. She was all warmth and sunshine and cinnamon." Dean's eyes lost focus as he gazed out into the engine bay. "I remember her getting up early and making pie and singing and just scooping me up into hugs. She used to tell me angels were watching over me. I guess it stuck and that's why I paint angels."

"You know," Cas said thoughtfully, "I've been here two weeks and barely know anything about you."

"I could say the same." Dean cleaned up the burger mess and shoved the tray back in the bag. He opened the smaller container and made a happy noise when he found two pieces of pie inside. "Apple! My fave." He moved one slice into the lid, then separated the lid from the bottom, handing a piece of pie to Cas. "So we're sharing dinner," he said, spearing a piece of the pie with a plastic fork, "and we should get to know each other."

Castiel nodded. "What would you like to know?"

"Tell me about your family. Do you really have a brother named Lucifer?"

"Yes," Castiel scowled. "He's an asshole. Thinks he owns the world and the rest of us exist to serve him. He's really not that far off the original. I'm closest to my older brothers, Michael and Gabe. We've always gotten along well."

"I'm pretty close with Sammy. He's my younger brother. Four years younger."

"I have a younger brother too, Raphael. He's ten years younger. Mother calls him her surprise. Michael is six and a half years older than me, Lucifer is eighteen months younger than him, and Gabe is almost exactly twelve months older than me."

Dean smiled. "You get along with your folks?"

"For the most part. My mother can be overbearing at times. You?"

"Yeah, not so much. My dad…" Dean snorted. "He's a piece of work." He shoved all the trash back into the plastic bag and stood, brushing crumbs off his jeans. "I told him I wanted to go to art school and he told me he wasn't paying for his kid to become some 'faggot art loser'. So I built my portfolio, and applied to schools on the side. My high school art teacher let me use his address for the aps. Maryland Institute offered a free ride and I got the fuck out of West Virginia."

He knotted the bag of trash and dropped it off the side of the scaffold.

"You've sold several paintings right? So why bother with school at all? You're already successful enough to have bought this place."

"I need that piece of paper. Sure, the commissions are rolling in now. I'm the new thing, the new kid on the block. A certain crowd with a disposable income likes what I'm doing. So I'm making money. Next year, someone else might be the hot new thing. And if I drop out, then what? What do I fall back on? If I have the diploma, I could teach. I'd still be able to have some type of income."
"I understand. But you want to be a painter, right?"

"Ideally? Yes." Dean gazed up at Lucifer. "There's still so many projects I want to do. I want to do a modernized version of some of Reni's work. A punk version of those god-awful cherubs that pop up on everything from mugs to checkbook covers. I want to do a version of Michelangelo's *Pieta* but with a modern woman holding a soldier in her arms." Dean swigged the rest of his beer. "Most of all, I want to prove my father wrong."

"You will. You're talented. Your paintings are like nothing I've ever seen."

The other man turned to him, green eyes sparkling. "Thanks, Cas," he said softly.

"You're welcome."

Dean didn't look away, neither did Cas, they just kind of stared at each other, bodies inadvertently moving towards each other.

A car backfired on Remington, and they both jumped. Cas was sad to see the moment broken. He could easily spend a day staring into Dean's eyes, cataloging each individual shade of gold and green. He wondered when he'd gotten so damn sappy.

"Come on, man," Dean said, "let's go to Benny's. I'll buy you a beer and you can tell me more about what a jerk Lucifer is. And tell me about all your brothers, since I'm painting them."

"Ok."

Castiel watched as Dean leapt off the scaffold, jumping onto the pole and sliding the rest of the way down. He turned and looked up at Castiel. "Go for it," he grinned, a challenge in his voice.

Cas hesitated. The scaffold was a solid four feet from the pole.

Dean cleared his throat loudly, still grinning like an idiot.

Taking a deep breath, Castiel threw caution to the wind and leapt from the platform. He caught the pole and slid down, not as gracefully as Dean, but landing solidly just the same.

"Nice!" Dean cheered.

"That was fun!"

Dean grinned at him, but then his eyes darkened as he looked over Cas's shoulder. "Dude. You didn't."

"What?" Cas's eyes followed Dean's, to where the other man was staring at his bike.

"I know you didn't lean your bike up against my baby, dude."

"Uhh."

"Move it. Please. You didn't know, but I swear…"

Castiel moved the bike to the side, far from the tan covered car.

"Wanna see her? She's perfect."

"Sure."
Dean grinned, grabbed one end of the canvas and pulled hard. The fabric slipped away, revealing glossy black metal and shiny chrome. There was indeed a car under there. A gorgeous, sex-on-four-wheels car.

"This is my baby. A 1967 Chevrolet Impala with a 327 and a four barrel carb. I stole her from my dad the night I left for school. He surprised the fuck out of me and sent the title a week later."

"She's beautiful," Cas murmured. Dean's grin grew impossibly wider.

"Damn right. Love me, love my car. Unfortunately, she spends a lot of time in here under the cover. B-more traffic makes it a little much to drive her around all the time." Dean turned, and made for the stairs. "Ok, shower, then beer. Sound good?"

"Sounds like a plan."

"Hey Cas?" Dean called from the stairwell.

"Yes, Dean?"

He poked his head back out, and the smile on his face was sweet and slightly shy.

"I'm really glad you moved in."

Then he was gone, up the stairs before Cas could say a word.

Now

The Monday after the book signing, Castiel parked the Prius he'd rented two spots down from Dean's baby. He retrieved the package he'd brought with him and left the car, locking the doors behind him. The Impala looked exactly the same. Same glorious shiny paint and sparkling chrome, she sat like a queen amongst the newer, modern cars in the parking lot of Parkville High School.

He walked up the sidewalk towards the front of the school. A handful of students were milling around, waiting for the buses to take them home or catching rides with their friends. A few stared at him like they recognized him, which wouldn't be surprising.

There was a large picture of him in the back of the book, and the book had been popular with the teen audience. Sure, he was no John Green, but he was sure some of the students staring at him with wide eyes knew exactly who he was. And normally, he would have loved to stop and talk, but he was on a mission and he wanted to catch Dean before he left for the day.

He signed in at the main office and got directions to the art hall. He was impressed by many of the artworks lining the walls outside Dean's classroom, amused by the Mr. Winchester placard outside the door. Standing just outside, he could hear Dean's deep voice, as he instructed the students in his charge.

"...and your monochromatic still-lifes are due by Friday. I'm looking forward to seeing the finished projects. I know how hard you guys have been working on them. I'm staying late tomorrow and Thursday, if anyone wants to hang out and get some work done. You bring the skills; I'll bring the Zep and the popcorn. I'm really pleased with the album covers you guys turned in, by the way. Impressed would be a better description."

The bell rang, and a flood of students filled the hall.
"Have a good afternoon, guys, see you tomorrow!" Dean called to the kids streaming from his room.

A few doors down, a short redhead in a black dress and a Gryffindor scarf was watching him closely. The weight of her stare was intimidating. She looked just this side of too old to be a student. Ignoring her, Castiel slipped into the classroom.

Dean was at the front, facing away from him, pinning a picture of various bowls and other items painted all in varying shades of blue to the corkboard. He was in khaki pants and an orange plaid button down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Cas's mouth went dry as he caught sight of the tattooed feathers trailing down the back of Dean's arms.

God, he didn't know what to say.

He wanted to do so many things, first and foremost sweep Dean into his arms and beg forgiveness then kiss him silly. But he couldn't.

Dean was getting married. He'd missed his chance.

*Dammit.*

The red head from before slipped in the other door, and perched on the first desk she came too. Dean didn't notice her either, deep in thought as he studied the blue painting.

"Yo, Winchester," she finally said.

He jumped. "Jeez, Charlie…" he trailed off as he turned, catching sight of Cas at the back of the room.

Dean's face went white.

"Hello, Dean," Cas said quietly.

_________

Oh fuck.

He couldn't be here, not here, not at work, not in his town, not here period. And Charlie just sat there, grinning at him.

Fuck.

"Uh…yeah," he mumbled intelligently.

Charlie snorted and he glared at her.

"Um…hey, Cas."

"Cas? As in Castiel? As in wrote *Painted Angels* Castiel? You know, the book that's about you but isn't about you, at least that's what you keep saying, but it's totally about you, isn't it?" She said all of that without taking a breath, and Dean felt his cheeks flame.

Cas strode up the aisle between the desks, looking amazing in a pair of jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and a black leather coat. Jesus, he was still so unfairly hot.

"Castiel Novak," he smiled, holding his hand out.

"Charlie Bradbury. I teach computers. And I'm his best friend," she burbled happily. "Also, I love
your book. I'm a lesbian, and do you know how hard it is to find quality stories about same sex couples? I mean, it's next to impossible, or it's all porn and no plot and no one wants that, at least not outside of fan fiction, or I don't know maybe they do, but oh my god, I love your book!"

"Thanks…"

"…but then I did figure out that it was about Dean, I just can't understand why he'd leave someone as awesome as…"

"Charlie!"

She jumped. "Sorry."

"Did you need something?" Dean asked, aware of the cold tone in his voice.

"Yes. I needed…I needed…I need to go back to my classroom. Goodbye. I'm gone." She darted out the door.

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. Why are you here?"

Cas shifted uncomfortably. He set a brown paper wrapped package down on Dean's desk. "You forgot this. I wanted to return it. It's your book."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Dean squirmed, unsure of what to say.

"So I…I saw the Impala in the lot. She still looks good."

"Thanks," Dean said softly.

"Well…I guess I should…I guess I should go."

"Yeah."

Castiel turned, his shoulders slumped.

"Cas?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for bringing me the book. You didn't have to do that."

The other man turned slowly. "Yes I did. It was obviously one of your favorites. I just thought…I just thought you'd want it back."

"Yeah. Thanks. I do appreciate it."

Cas nodded. "Dean, let me take you out to dinner. Just as friends. We can catch up - I want to hear about the old crowd and what Sam's doing, and Victor. Just dinner. Just as friends. Please?"

"I don't think…"
"You can bring your fiancé. Please. I owe you. Let's be honest, this book wouldn't be so successful if it wasn't for you."

Dean dropped into his desk chair with a sigh. He toyed with some paperclips scattered across the desk top, avoiding Castiel's eyes and earnest expression. This wasn't a road he wanted to go back down and it sure as hell was a door to another life. He needed to keep that door closed, for his own sanity's sake.

So of course, when he opened his mouth to tell Cas no, the word yes slipped out instead.

"Great! Why don't we meet at Sotto Sopra in Mount Vernon? Friday at eight?"

"Ok."

"I can't wait to meet your fiancé. I'll see you then." Cas fumbled in his pocket for a moment, then pulled out a creased square of paper. "This is where I'm staying and my cell number. I was going to leave it, if you weren't here."

Dean took the paper and for just a brief moment, their fingers brushed.

He yanked his hand back like he'd been burned. Cas looked at him with an odd expression on his face, then set the paper down without a word.

"I'll see you Friday then," he said quietly, leaving before Dean could answer him.

At least he managed to wait until Cas was gone to bury his face in his hands.
It was snowing again, as Dean carefully maneuvered the Impala down Avondale Road towards Anna's little bungalow. Their little bungalow, he mentally corrected himself. He'd been living there for almost four months, since the lease on his tiny one bedroom apartment ended. It made sense, since they were getting married after all.

Christmas lights twinkled in the windows of the small house as he pulled the Impala into the driveway behind Anna's blue Civic. The snow had already covered her windows, so she'd clearly been home for a while. Dean had left school in a daze, still completely undone by Cas's visit, and stopped at a bar on the way home and had a beer.

Letting himself into the house, he noted the tree stand and ornament boxes in the living room. The tree was still outside. She must have picked it up on the way home. He guessed he knew what he'd be doing that night.

Anna was sitting at the kitchen table, a steaming mug of tea at her side as she graded papers. Her red hair tumbled over her shoulder, a look of concentration on her face as she studied a student's answers.

"Hey, babe," she greeted him, not looking up.

Dean set his bag on a chair and leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "Hey."

"How was work?"

"Fine. A few of the kids turned in some gorgeous album covers. I'd love to keep a few of them."

"Album covers?" she asked confusedly.

"Yeah, I let them choose an album that they loved and make their own covers. Some of them turned out amazing. Some real talented kids in my classes." He opened the fridge and dug out a beer. "I see a lot of potential there."

"Meanwhile, I'm grading English papers with unreal mistakes for a pack of eighth graders." She sighed, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. "I just went over sentence structure last week. It's like it's in one ear and out the other some days."

"That's just kids, Anna. They just forget is all."

"You're far more forgiving then I am, but then again, you're just teaching art. It's not like they need it for their futures unless they want to do graphic art or something."

Dean bit his bottom lip, deliberately ignoring the barb. Most members of Anna's family were teachers, but they taught things they considered important, such as English, science, and math. Dean was looked down upon by her family for teaching something 'soft'. He really hated it when she referred to his job as **just teaching art**. He wanted to argue with her, and bring up the statistics that showed how important arts and music education really was.

"What do you want for dinner?" he asked instead.

"Not hungry. There are leftovers though, and I was hoping you could put the tree in the stand so I can decorate it." She didn't look up from her papers, didn't even seem to realize she'd hurt his
feelings.

Dean sighed. "Do we have plans for Friday night?"

"No, I don't think so. I have my final dress fitting Saturday morning, but you don't get to go to that. Can't see me in it until the 28th." She grinned up at him, and he did his best to plaster on a smile that didn't look like a grimace. "Why?"

"An old friend wants to take us out to dinner. We're supposed to meet at Sotto Sopra at eight."

"What friend?"

"Uh. Old college pal. Cas Novak." If she recognized the name, she didn't show it, just smiled and nodded.

"That sounds like fun. I like meeting your friends."

"Ok, cool. That's cool." He ducked his hot face into the fridge so Anna wouldn't see him blushing. Digging through the leftovers, he found the meatloaf and mashed potatoes he'd made Friday night. That would work. He popped the container in the microwave and sat down at the table, pulling his laptop out of his bag and powering it up.

"Did you pick out gifts for your groomsmen yet? And you should get something extra special for Sam."

"No, I was going to go this weekend."

"Ok, just make sure you do it. And we have lunch with Pastor Jackson after church on Sunday. So you're going to have to actually come with me this time."

"Anna…"

"You know, for someone who used to obsess over and paint angels, you have an odd aversion to church."

"That's a little out of line."

Anna looked over her reading glasses, her brown eyes narrowed. "Just saying, Dean. I'd have thought you'd love church."

The comment about his job, and now this - something was wrong. "OK, what's going on? You're pissed about something and taking it out on me."

She sighed. "Cas Novak, huh? That's who we're going out to dinner with?"

"Yeah," Dean said warily.

"I know who he is. I've read the book. The dedication in the front, and David, the Baltimore artist that paints angels, is the main character? Did you think that I wouldn't figure out the book was about you? I'm not stupid you know. And I know that's where you were Saturday. It was all over the paper, that he was here doing a book signing, and god, Hester saw you there. Seeing him obviously upset you or something, or you wouldn't have ended up at Sam's. And then you lied about it."

Dean's blood ran cold.

"And now we're having dinner with him? Next thing out of your mouth better be that he's married or
"I don't know. I didn't ask. But I did tell him about you. He knows I'm getting married. He just wanted to have dinner and catch up."

"So you believe his intentions are innocent?"

"Yes."

"Not to mention you had this whole big gay thing in college and didn't think to mention it."

"Because it wasn't…"

"It is important!" She crossed her arms over her chest, anger written all over her pretty face. "We're getting married on December 28th. That is less than four weeks away. Things like this are important. You share sexual history with your finance. How could you keep this from me?"

"I didn't think…"

"You're right, you didn't think! So what are you? Bi, gay? Am I always going to be waiting for the other shoe to drop in this marriage? Is there going to be a marriage at all?" She was really worked up, screaming now, and Dean dropped his face into his hands.

"It's not like that, Anna, I swear. Cas and I had a thing in college, I was experimenting…"

"You never even tell me you love me."

"Anna…"

"My family knows. Everyone knows." She stood, haphazardly shoving papers back in her bag. "Is there even going to be a wedding, Dean?"

"Yes, Anna! He's just…he's nothing to me, I swear. If I was trying to hide it, would I be taking you to dinner with him Friday night?"

She stopped mid-shove and stared right at him. "There's really nothing going on with you and him?"

"No, god, Anna! I swear."

Putting the rest of her papers into her bag, Anna zipped it shut, and turned away. "I want to believe you…"

"Then believe me," Dean replied, standing and crossing the room. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. "I'm marrying you, Anna. Not him. And just because I don't say I love you doesn't mean I don't. I don't know why I don't say it, but I do. I do love you."

Anna's body relaxed against him. He held her a moment more, trying very hard to squelch the anger brewing inside of him. She had no right to question him. He'd always been true and had never given her any reason to doubt him.

"Ok. Ok then." She pulled out of his arms, taking her bag and leaving the kitchen. Dean followed her into the hallway, where she set her bag by the door. "I'm going to go out. I told Hester I'd meet her at the mall so we can shop for Mom and Dad. You'll get the tree up while I'm gone?" Anna pulled her coat and purse out of the hall closet.

"Yeah, I'll get it done."
Dean followed her outside, moved the Impala so she could pull out, then made his way back into the warm little kitchen, passing the tree stand with a sigh. Grabbing another beer, he accidentally knocked his laptop bag off the kitchen chair, grateful that the computer wasn't in it.

When he reached down to pick it up, a book slid out.

*Painted Angels* landed face up on the floor, the cover art of a highly stylized Michael staring up at him. It was Reni's Michael. The archangel was depicted as a feminine form, blonde and in armor, crushing Lucifer beneath his feet. It didn't look anything like the one he'd painted, although the pose was similar, and he'd definitely been inspired by the painting.

He picked the book up from the floor, staring at it, his eyes tracing Cas's name, before shoving it back into the bag with a huff. Dean took a deep swig of beer, and headed for the tree, leftover meatloaf long forgotten.

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October 2000

Castiel woke to the smell of something warm and buttery. Never mind it was 3:25 in the morning, according to his watch. He pulled himself out of bed, wincing slightly at the chill of the firehouse's tile floor. Pulling on a pair of socks and old sweats, he wandered out of the room and into the main living area.

Dean was facing away from him, baggy sweats and a ragged black tee hanging off his frame, pulling a cookie sheet from the oven. He turned to see Cas, an apologetic grin on his face.

"I'm sorry if I woke you. I couldn't sleep." Dean busied himself moving cookies from the sheet to a cooling rack with a spatula.

"It's ok. They smell really great. Chocolate chip?"

"Yup," Dean smiled, "one of my faves."

Castiel got a couple of glasses out and the milk jug from the fridge. "Can't have cookies without milk," he declared, pouring them both a glass. Dean smiled and nodded, shutting off the oven. He piled a bunch of cookies on a plate, and grabbed his cup of milk.

"Let's go sit on the couch."

"Ok."

They settled in, the cookies between them and the glasses on the low table in front of them. Cas stuffed one in his mouth, moaning around the warm, buttery, chocolaty goodness. He ate another one just as quickly.

Dean stared at him with a raised eyebrow and an amused smile on his face. "Dude. It's just a cookie."

"No, Dean, you have no idea. My parents were completely against junk food of any kind. And these are like the best I've ever had. Delicious."

"Just cookies, jeez," Dean said quietly, although his pleasure at Castiel's praise was written all over his handsome face. "I just like to bake."

"You're good at it. Really good at it," Cas said happily, grabbing another cookie. He ate this one a
little slower, savoring the chocolate melting on his tongue.

"So, I should probably bake for you more often, huh?"

"Mmm, just not at ass o'clock in the morning. Why are you up, anyway?"

"Dunno. Couldn't sleep. Lucifer's done, and I'm getting ready to start Raphael - and my Dad called. He was drunk and rambling and it was 1am by that point, so I just gave up."

"Well the cookies are wonderful, but I'm very sorry you can't sleep."

The other man ran a hand down his face. "I'm used to it. I get like this a lot. It's the brain rush of mentally preparing to do Raphael, plus my Dad's crap. I have a weird sleep schedule to begin with."

"What are your plans for Raphael?"

"You really want to know? Or are you just being nice?"

Cas shook his head, "No, I really do want to know. Coming from a super-religious family, I find your interpretations of the angels to be incredibly interesting."

Dean looked surprised. "Really?"

"Really. I'm curious about them. Like, why is Lucifer's face covered in sores and his halo made of glass?"

Green eyes sparkled. "You really want to hear all my weird ass theories?"

"Yes."

"Ok...well, I have this idea, that like, angels can't just walk around Earth in their true forms, because they're basically just light and energy. So to be seen on Earth, they have to choose a vessel. But it can't just be any human; it needs to be a special human. Someone with the right bloodline." Dean blushed slightly, and stared down at his hands.

"Vessel? So basically, an angel would need to possess a human?"

"Exactly. But they need permission from the vessel. And Lucifer, maybe he can't get to the right vessel, so he takes a human that kinda works. But the vessel's falling apart. 'Cause it's not his true vessel. And the glass represents ice, because he's an angel, not a demon, and I think he'd run cold instead of hot. That's why Hell is hot. It's to torment him even more." Dean took a sip of his milk. "I sound like an idiot."

"No, it's fascinating. I want to hear more. What kind of vessel will Raphael choose?"

"I dunno. I was all ready to make them all male vessels, but then right before my Dad called, and I was dozing, I dreamt of this powerful, tall black woman. Super elegant and a little scary. I dreamt she had me on my knees and her eyes were glowing blue and she was definitely about to smite me." he trailed off again, and stared at Cas. "Dude, you're about three seconds from calling the loony bin on me, aren't you?"

"No, why would you think that? I'm intrigued! I'm the one that wants to be the writer, but you, Dean, you have a vivid imagination. I'm blown away, to be honest."

Dean's whole face lit up. "Seriously?"
"Seriously." Cas set the plate of cookies on the table and scooted a little closer to Dean. "Tell me about Gabriel?"

"Ok," Dean said quietly. "Gabriel's a short, happy guy. He loves candy, and he's hiding on Earth. He got tired of Heaven and reinvented himself as Loki."

"The Trickster?"

"Yeah. So he goes around messing with people he thinks deserves it, giving them their just desserts. He's kind of a jerk, but at the same time, he's kind of awesome. I can't see his face yet, though."

"Fascinating. And Michael?"

"I dunno." Dean bit his lower lip. "Michael keeps appearing to me as a younger version of my Dad. I don't…I don't like that at all."

"Huh."

Castiel studied Dean for a moment, and the other man looked up, his eyes meeting Cas's. They just kind of stared at each other. It was weird.

"You know Vic's moving out?" Dean said abruptly, effectively killing the moment.

"No, I didn't know. When did that happen?"

"Told me today. He's moving in with his girl." Dean stood, sweeping cookie crumbs off his lap, and he crossed the floor to stand near the big window. His shoulders slumped, as he stared out at Remington Avenue. "Guess you'll be going too?"

Castiel startled a bit. "Uh, did you…do you want me too?" he asked confusedly.

"No. No, I don't want you to go. But I'm not easy to live with, and no one's stayed as long as Victor has, and I just, I dunno. I just thought if he left, you would too."

For the first time, Cas was seeing Dean's insecurities, all the little hurts and scars. Vic had sort of told him how rough Dean's life had been, and there were things Dean himself had told him, but even with that, Dean always seemed to be so sure of himself, and completely in control of his life.

But now, at four o'clock in the morning, Dean's heart was on his sleeve and he didn't even realize it. His defenses were gone, and his walls lay in rubble at his feet.

"Dean, I don't want to leave. I like it here. I like the neighborhood and the firehouse, and I like you. So unless you want me to go, I'm staying."

"Yeah? Even though I'm annoying and bake in the middle of the night and sometimes sit up and play the piano?"

Cas could hear the relieved smile in Dean's voice, even though he didn't turn around. "To be fair, I've never heard you play the piano, so the jury's still out on that."

Dean turned back around, a shy smile on his face. "Well, I can remedy that one, at least." He sat on the black piano bench and stretched his hands. "What do you want to hear?"

"Whatever you want to play."

He thought a minute, his brow wrinkled into the cutest expression. "Huh. I know! I'll play the
absolutely most clichéd song a guy can play on the piano."

Fingers danced across keys, playing a series of little sounds, none of which sounded like a real song, then he smiled at Cas and started playing in earnest. He recognized the song immediately, Billy Joel's Piano Man, and Dean grinned at the expression on Cas's face.

"Told you it was cliché," he smirked. Then he started to sing.

"It's four am on a Wednesday, and Castiel shuffles in. There's a plate of cookies sitting next to me, and the day has begun to begin." Dean dissolved into giggles, absolutely dying over his own parody of the song.

Castiel laughed with him, highly amused. "That's hysterical. You're a clown."

Dean finally calmed down. "Ok, ok, I'll play you something real now." He flexed his fingers again, and started playing. This time, Castiel didn't recognize the music at first. And when Dean started to sing, he was surprised.

With Piano Man, he'd been fooling around, but this time…

His voice was low, slightly gravelly, and warm like whiskey. "There are places I remember. All my life, though some have changed. Some forever not for better, some have gone and some remain."

"All these places have their moments, with lovers and friends I still can recall. Some are dead and some are living. In my life I've loved them all." His fingers danced on the keys, his face peaceful and lost in the song.

Castiel was fascinated, and not for the first time, he found himself mesmerized by Dean, by the way he moved, his voice, and every little thing about him.

"But of all these friends and lovers, there is no one compares with you. And these memories lose their meaning, when I think of love as something new." Dean turned his head, and smiled at Cas, nodding his head to indicate that he should come sit beside him on the bench. In a daze, Cas stood and walked towards the piano. Dean nodded his encouragement, and Castiel sat beside him.

"Though I know I'll never lose affection, for people and things that went before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life I love you more."

Reaching around him, Dean picked up Cas's right hand and laid it on the keyboard, positioning his fingers where he wanted them. Using Cas's hand to play the notes, Dean finished the song.

"Though I know I'll never lose affection, for people and things that went before. I know I'll often stop and think about them, in my life I love you more."

Castiel could barely breathe, looking into Dean's eyes.

"In my life I love you more."

The last note died in the air, and Dean stared at him like he was seeing Castiel for the first time.

Cas held his breath.

Dean moved closer, his eyes sliding closed, his arm still around Castiel's waist.

"Jesus Christ, Winchester, it's four a.m. for fucks sake, and I really love your cookies, but goddamn it man, I need my beauty sleep!"
The other man jumped, pulled himself away from Cas, his cheeks flushed and his eyes wide.

"I mean, cookies are great, and if you had stopped with the cookies, I woulda been fine, but no one needs the Beatles at four a.m., ok?" Victor stood in the middle of the common area, scratching his belly through his Baltimore PD shirt. "Hey, Cas."

"Yeah, couldn't sleep, and then Cas wanted to hear me play. Sorry, Vic."

"It's ok."

Dean hopped off the bench, and moved into the kitchen to clean up, Castiel watching him go, frustration burning low in his gut.

He'd been sure Dean Winchester was about to kiss him.

And for a moment, Castiel wanted to kill Victor Henrikson.
That Weird Little Spark

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Roadhouse smelled exactly the same; coffee, bacon, slightly stale beer, and the stink of old grease. Castiel pushed open the door, the little bells tingling, pulling off his gloves and blinking as he left the brightness of Remington Avenue behind.

The TV in the corner was muted, WJZ's afternoon newscast playing as Johnny Cash sang about the man in black. A familiar figure in a trucker cap stood behind the bar, flipping sandwiches on the old grill. The cracked picture of former (and deceased) Governor William Donald Schaefer still hung over the cash register. All the sports memorabilia, the BPD and BFD shields, the Natty Boh sign- it was all still the same.

Nothing had changed.

A powerful wave of nostalgia swept over him, as he stood in the restaurant on a Tuesday afternoon.

He could see everything in his mind's eye - Benny at his regular table, black mariner's cap perched jauntily on his head, grinning over a cup of java; Jo in second-skin jeans and a tight plaid shirt, taking orders from the table of cops that always sat near the windows; Pamela and Tessa in a booth, complaining loudly about Crowley, their smarmy landlord; Rufus, always in something Ravens purple or Orioles orange, bitching and moaning about his two favorite teams; Ash and Andy, permanently half-baked, looking for coffee, pancakes, and scrapple; and Ellen herself, beautiful and loving, more of a mother to Dean than a friend.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat drug in", a warm female voice said. "Never thought I'd see you back in here, boy." Ellen Harvelle-Singer stood in front of him in all her glory, grey-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. "Look at you. All grown up. It's good to see you sweetheart." Her smile was genuine, and just for him.

"Ellen. You look wonderful. Haven't aged a day."

"And you're still as charming a liar as you were back then." She reached out for him, pulling him into a hug, and he melted against her. She hugged him for a long time, then pushed back, still holding him. "Let me look at you. Still so handsome, with those pretty blue eyes," she murmured with a smile. "So you here for lunch, or just popping in?"

"I'm starving. And it smells great in here."

"Well come sit at the bar then, the old man…"

"HEY!" Bobby yelled indignantly.

"…will fix something up for you. And you are an old man, old man."

Bobby hmmph'ed, then smiled at Castiel. "Good to see you again, kid. How ya been?"

"Good," Cas smiled, sliding onto a bar stool. "How's everyone else been? I saw Tessa's store is empty…"

A dark look crossed Ellen's face. "Tessa got breast cancer about three years ago. She -she went
"Oh. Oh, that's- that's horrible."

"Mmm," Ellen said with a quiet nod. "And Pamela, well, she didn't take it well. She sold the shop to one of her artists and disappeared. We don't know where she went. Her and Tessa, well, they'd become more than friends since you left us."

"Wow. I had no idea. I'm so sorry, Ellen." Castiel stared down at his hands. "I should have stayed in touch."

"Shoulda done more than that, boy, but that's another story." She slid a menu onto the bar. "Figure out what you want to eat, sweetie."

"A BLT and fries would be good." Castiel handed back the menu without looking at it. Ellen nodded, and Bobby tossed a few pieces of bacon on the grill. "What about Jo?"

Ellen smiled. "Jo is a nurse at Hopkins. She's seeing a lovely young man, they're getting very serious."

"So she finally got over Dean, then?" Cas asked with a wry grin.

"Yes. And thank god, but you might have had a lot to do with that." Ellen poured a glass of sweet tea and set it down for him. "Benny's still next door, with the bar, and Andy and Ash are still across the street."

"Does Rufus still come in?"

"Oh yeah, only he's got arthritis in his hip, so he's even more bitchy now." She laughed. "Not that you'd notice. He was always bitchy."

"That's the damn truth," Bobby muttered, "damn idjit."

Castiel played with his straw wrapper. "Firehouse looks the same," he said quietly.

"Dean still owns it. Don't know why he doesn't sell the damn place."

"Bobby slid the finished sandwich and fries onto the bar. "Probably 'cause he's a stubborn ass."

"Robert…"

"Well he is. Shoulda sold the place years ago. He's gettin' married and they got a place. He don't paint no more. Why hang onto it?"

"None of our business," Ellen said firmly. She poured herself a glass of tea. "Why don't you take a break while we're slow, hon?"

"Woman, if you wanted to get rid of me, shoulda just said so." He leaned over and kissed her cheek, then disappeared up the back stairwell.

Cas took a deep breath. "I'm about to get it, aren't I?"

"Humph. Ought too. Mess you left that boy in. Nearly drowned himself in alcohol." Ellen sighed. She picked up a rag and swiped at an invisible spot on her spotless bar.

"He told me he didn't love me. What was left for me after that? What other choice did I have?"
"I ain't sayin' you were right. But I'm not sayin' you were wrong, either. And then after that thing with his dad -"

"What did John do?" Cas asked confusedly.

"Dean didn't tell you?"

Cas took a sip of his tea. "No. I've only seen him briefly."

"Huh. Well that ain't my story to tell, kid. You'll have to ask him about that."

"Ellen, I get it, I shouldn't have left, but…” Cas sighed, "he made me feel like there was never going to be any chance for us. I didn't know what to do. So I ran. I ran and I didn't look back."

"And now you're back?"

"And now I'm back."

"He's engaged. They're getting married on the 28th. You come here to break them up?"

"No. I had no intention of seeing him. I wanted to, but I thought it would be better…” Cas idly chewed a fry. "Then he showed up at my book signing. I thought maybe…"

Ellen reached across the bar and patted his hand. "I think you missed your chance, sweetie. He moved on. If you had come back sooner? Who knows."

"Did he try- did he ever try to find me?"

"No. This is Dean we're talking about. He buried himself in alcohol. Then, well, he got himself cleaned up and he moved out of Remington and hasn't been back since. He calls once in a while, and sometimes I run into him up in the County. But he left everything behind."

"Because I left him behind," Castiel said sadly.

Ellen sighed, reached for his glass and refilled it. "I don't know. His dad, well John's a piece of work. And the responsibilities he heaped on Dean when he was just a little kid, coupled with the horrible things he used to say to that boy, about his art, about him personally…I don't know. What you did probably didn't help, but you didn't create the mess that Dean is. No, sweetie, I don't think you need to take all that blame on yourself."

Cas nodded, and ate a few more fries.

"So you're back. Are you staying? In Baltimore, I mean."

"I'd like too. I'm looking for some place to live."

"And Dean?"

He looked up, noticing for the first time the shrewd look in her eyes.

"Why?"

"What does your being back mean for him? Are you still in love with him?"

His stomach sank and he pushed the plate away. "Four days ago? I would have said no."
"And now?"

Cas took a deep breath, thinking back to Saturday, and the way his heart had pounded when he looked up and saw those all too familiar green eyes staring back at him. "Yes," he said softly, "god help me, I'm still in love with him."

"Then you've got a problem, kiddo. What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, I guess I'll deal with it. I'm not a home wrecker," he said with a bitter laugh.

"Hmm."

"He is happy, isn't he?"

"I don't know. I guess so. Truth be told, I see and talk to Sam more than I do Dean."

"I asked him why he stopped painting and he said because I left. I hope he's happy. That's all I ever really wanted for him."

"Well, that's good. 'Cause that's probably all you're gonna get."

The door opened, the bells tingling cheerfully. Ellen gently touched his hand and grabbed some menus, walking out from around the counter to take care of the newly arrived customers.

Castiel stared down at his discarded plate, wishing, not for the first time, that he'd done things differently.

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October 2000

Halloween, and the firehouse was stuffed full of people. Dean stared at the crowd packed into his apartment and groaned inwardly. This was so not his scene. None of it. He worked his way across the floor, trying to weave his way through the mess of humans and towards the back stairwell that led up to the roof. He crashed into something solid, and found Benny grinning at him, fake vampire teeth and all.

"Hey, brotha!" Benny had a case of beer under one arm, and a full, billowy black cape tied around his neck. In addition to the fangs, he was sporting a red and black pirate hat.

"Wha' the hell you 'sposed to be?" Dean slurred. Crap. He hadn't realized he was already that drunk.

"Oh, Christ. I see you don' need any of this," Benny groused, setting the beer down out of Dean's reach. "How ya doin', kid?"

"I'm fine." Dean swept his eyes over Benny's outfit again. "So, dude, wha' the fuck you wearin'?"

"I'm a vampire, dumbass. Then someone decided to slap a pirate hat on my head. So guess I'm a vampire pirate now."

"Vampire pirate," Dean giggled, "Vampirate!"

Benny rolled his eyes. "That's terrible, Dean. Jesus, how drunk are you, anyway?"

"Muchly. I am muchly drunk."

"Why?" Benny asked, concerned.
"It seemed like a good idea at the time…"

"You headin' upstairs?"

"Yeah, Ben, this is…jus' too crowded in here. I jus'…don' wanna be here."

Benny patted him on the back. "Then go. Ever'one's either drunk or high up in here. You won't be missed."

"'K." Dean stepped into the stairwell. "Thanks, Ben."

"Yeah, go on. Get outta here."

Making his way up the stairs and onto the roof, Dean shivered a bit in the chill air and pulled his coat tighter around him. He pulled a few crates closer to the little metal fire pit, and gathered wood, stacking it inside and lighting it. The fire caught quickly, and he held his hands up to warm them.

Halloween.

It was unbelievable just how much he hated it, although it probably had more to do with the fact that Halloween meant November 2nd was just around the corner. And he hated that date more than anything.

He sighed and stared up at the stars, forcibly changing his train of thought, focusing on the Raphael canvas instead, still blank and waiting for him downstairs. Imagining it in his mind, he added a splash of bright blue to the background, gradually working in the woman's suit and her fierce, angry stare. He thought about the ice blue he would add to her eyes to make her look like she was about to smite someone.

Thinking about ice blue eyes made him think about deep blue eyes, which made him think about sexy tousled dark brown hair and soft pink lips, and just like that, he was thinking about Castiel again.

It had been happening more and more, especially since the other night, when Cas had stayed up with him, and sat warm against his thigh on the piano bench, those damn blue eyes twinkling in the light from the reflected streetlights.

Dean was going to kiss him. He'd just about been there when Vic came out of his room bitching about the piano.

This was uncharted territory for Dean Winchester. He'd always considered himself fairly aware of the attractiveness of both sexes, but had just chalked it up to his artistic nature. He'd been attracted to a lot of girls over the years, and he'd openly admired a few men, but…

But now - well, now he found himself incredibly attracted to another man. And he found himself thinking about that man all the damn time.

And he had no idea what he was going to do about it.

Adjusting the ridiculous pair of fluffy white wings he'd picked up, Castiel took a good long look around the common area of his apartment.

Vic's crowd and Dean's artsy friends were merged into the oddest amalgamation of future law enforcement members and artists that Castiel had ever seen.
There were a couple of very attractive, nurse-costumed coeds sitting on one end of the couch discussing Dostoevsky with a tall black man wearing a cowboy hat with paint spattered dreads down to the middle of his back.

Benny was in the kitchen, gleefully tossing grapes at Jo, who was dressed as a pirate. Benny also appeared to be a pirate but with vampire fangs.

He caught sight of Castiel and waved. Jo glared.

Victor was holding court on the piano bench, dressed as a natty gangster, and a gorgeous woman in a red flapper dress was perched on his lap.

"Cas! Nice wings, bro! C'mere and meet my woman!"

Castiel smiled and wandered through the rowdy crowd. "Hello," he said, extending his hand.

She took it, her hand pale and smooth with perfectly manicured red nails. With a flip of honey-brown hair, she smiled up at him. "Bela Talbot," she announced with a crisp British accent. "Pleased to meet you, Castiel - and your wings are lovely."

"Thank you. I'm pleased to meet you as well. I like your accent."

Bela smiled, clearly pleased. "Thank you, darling."

Victor leaned forward and kissed her neck. "She's mine, Cas, get your own."

"Very funny." He looked around the noisy room again. "Have you seen Dean?"

"Huh." Vic looked around. "I dunno man. He doesn't like Halloween. Might be hidin' up on the roof."

"If he doesn't like Halloween, why the hell did he have a party?"

"Hell if I know man."

Cas sighed. "Ok. Nice to meet you, Bela. I'm going to go look for him."

Bela nodded, her attention already back on Vic, and Cas turned away. He waded through the crowd of college students, all in various stages of drunkenness, heading for the stairway at the back of the common area.

Opening the door onto the roof, he gazed up at the full moon and the sky full of stars.

He smelled wood smoke on the chill air and knew he'd found Dean, his suspicion confirmed when he spied his hunched figure crouched in front of their little metal fire pit.

"Hello, Dean," he called, not wanting to startle him.

"Hey, Cas, c'mon over." Dean waved to a couple of crates sitting near the fire. "Best accommodations in the house righ' here."

Castiel frowned at the slur in Dean's voice. He had obviously had quite a bit to drink already. "Are you ok?"

"I'm good, man, hell I'm great!" The look on his face made a lie of his words. Dean's eyes were hooded, and he definitely didn't look happy. "I'm jus' peachy, and perfect and ever'thin' is jus'…" He
flopped down onto one of the crates. "Fuckin' hate Halloween," he mumbled.

"Then why throw a party?"

"'Cause ever'one wanted me to." Dean pulled a small bottle of Jack Daniels out of the inner pocket of his green coat, twisted off the top and drained the last two inches. He swallowed, and looked at the bottle, disappointed to find it empty. He huffed, and flung it over the back wall of the firehouse. It landed with a crash somewhere in the alley below.

"Ok, Cal Ripken, probably not a good idea to pitch glass bottles off the roof."

For some reason, this struck Dean as hysterical, and he laughed loudly.

"It's not that funny."

This made Dean laugh harder, his face red as he threw his head back, laughter coming in wheezing gasps. "Yes- yes it- it is!" he gasped.

Cas smiled at him, still giggling like an idiot, and pulled up a crate, plopping down next to him. "So why do you hate Halloween?"

Dean snorted. "Demons an' devils an' vampires…jus'…not my thing, dude." He looked Castiel over, finally catching sight of the white fluffy wings. "Now, tha's a good look, Mr. Angel of Thursday."

"Shut up. It's all the costume shop had left."

"No one said ya had'ta dress up. Coulda jus' worn your regular clothes an' come as one'a my angels."

"You're right, I could've. That would have saved me $25."

Dean grinned, then reached out to run his fingers through the wing's feathers. "S'nice. Soft. I like them."

"They are kinda fun," Castiel admitted.

"Cas, I'm really, really, really fuckin' drunk." He grinned again.

"I could tell."

"I'm so drunk."

"I know."

"So now…'cause we're alone an' all, an' I can tell ya now." Dean's brow furrowed. "But don' know if I should." He looked completely confused.

"Tell me what, Dean?" Cas leaned forward slightly, unconsciously drawing closer to Dean.

"I'm so fuckin' confused, Cas."

"About what? You can tell me anything, Dean, you know that."

Green eyes stared back at him, almost black in the flickering firelight.

"What is it?" Cas murmured. "You look…scared."

Dean fidgeted, fingers toying with the zipper on his coat. He looked up again, met eyes with Cas,
and god, there it was. That weird little spark, that odd bit of electricity he'd felt a few nights ago, when he sat next to Dean on the piano bench with the other man's arm around him, watching him move in with his eyes closed, so sure that Dean was about to kiss him.

"Y'know, the other nigh'? Or mornin'? Was mornin', I think…" Dean still looked confused, his eyes bleary.

"You mean the morning you made the cookies and played piano for me?"

"Yeah!" Dean exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "Tha' nigh'. Dude, I was…man, that was a bad nigh'." He was definitely having some difficulty staying focused, and his eyelids looked very heavy. "Dad called. Told me…told me bunch'a shit."

"What did he say to you? I know you were very upset. Did you want to talk about that?"

"No! No, no, not tha', not tha' at all. Not gonna…don' wanna talk about tha' shit, 'cause it's stupid, and my dad's stupid, an'…just wanted…to say. Y'know, you stayed up with me. An' tha' was so nice. And you're so nice…” Dean's expression was soft, and he smiled at Castiel. "Really like you, Cas. You're fuckin' awesome."

"You're pretty awesome, too, Dean."

Dean smiled, then seemed to lose the ability to hold himself upright, slumping against Castiel's shoulder. He quickly adjusted his body to a more stable position, wrapping an arm around Dean to keep him from slumping off the crate.

The other man nuzzled into him, and something inside of Cas melted. Dean was so close, so warm and pliant in his arms. He tried not to read too much into it, the way Dean was almost clinging to him, and he forced himself to watch the fire, and just hold onto Dean. That was what he seemed to need, and Castiel was more than happy to give it to him.

They sat and watched the fire for a long time, and the noise downstairs slowly faded away. By the time the fire died, Dean was asleep in his arms.

Castiel stared up at the stars, trying to sort out his feelings.

He liked Dean. A lot. And he was pretty sure his feelings were more than friendly. But he wasn't sure if that's what Dean wanted, or if Dean was even interested in guys at all. It was a scary line to walk, not knowing what crossing it would mean.

The one thing he knew for sure was that he cared very deeply for Dean.

Dean, who was softly snoring and drooling into his shirt. Castiel nudged him.

"Dean?"

"Mmm?"

"Let's get you to bed."

"'K," Dean murmured. He let Cas pull him to his feet and guide him into the stairwell.

The downstairs was empty, except for Benny, out cold on the couch, with Jo sound asleep on the other end.

He led Dean into his room, pulling back the sheets and blankets. Then he pushed Dean onto the bed,
smiling as he flopped right into the center. He pulled off Dean's boots, jeans, and outer layers, leaving him in just boxers and a tee, then gently maneuvered him onto one side of the bed, his head resting on the pillows.

Castiel was turning to go, when a hand reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"Stay. Don' wanna be 'lone."

Heart in his throat, Cas turned back and stared at Dean. Both of his eyes were closed, and he was still holding his wrist. "Don' wanna be 'lone," he muttered again, "jus' stay. Jus' stay with me."

"Ok," Cas murmured, stripping off the angel wings, and his outer layers, until all he had left was the same thing Dean was wearing. He shut the door, and turned off the lights, then crawled into the bed.

Dean rolled over, wrapping his arm around Cas's waist and laying his head on his shoulder.

"Thanks, Angel," he whispered, and dropped off into sleep.

The unexpected warmth on his shoulder startled him slightly. He wasn't sure how he felt about this. He was fully aware that he found Dean to be attractive and that he was becoming one of the best friends Castiel had ever had, but as Cas watched him for a moment, his heart doing some pretty crazy things, watching that sweet, peaceful face, he felt the warm feelings bubble up inside.

It was clear already that this was more than friendship for him, that what he felt for Dean was more, so much more, and on so many levels. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at the same time. He had no way of knowing if Dean felt anything close to the same amount of attraction, but if there was one thing Castiel was sure of, and would bet money on, was that Dean was going to kiss him.

He'd closed his eyes and leaned closer on that bench, and if fucking Victor hadn't interrupted, Dean would have kissed him.

He was sure of it.

Just like he was sure of the fact that he was totally and completely fucked - because he was absolutely falling for Dean Winchester.

Chapter End Notes

Natty Boh is actually National Bohemian aka The Beer of Baltimore and is a staple in my home.
November 2000

The day after Halloween dawned bright and crisp, and Castiel felt a little bit sad as he helped Victor load the last of his stuff into his little red S-10 pickup. Dean had a class, so it was just the two of them. When they were done, Victor smiled at Cas as he closed the tailgate.

"Brunch at Ellen's?"

"Yes. That's a good idea."

And that's how they found themselves sharing a booth in the Roadhouse, BLT and fries for Cas, short stack and bacon for Vic.

"And I'm gettin' the check, ok?"

"I won't argue with you there."

"Good."

They munched in silence for a while, the noisy chatter in the busy restaurant pleasant and oddly soothing. Pamela was sitting a few tables over with Tessa, both of them laughing and chatting happily. Benny waved from his usual table, looking incredibly perky for someone who'd passed out on the firehouse's couch blind drunk the night before.

"Bet Dean had a hell of a hangover this morning."

"I don't know. He was up and gone before I was. Early class."

"Hmm." Victor stared at his food for a moment, the expression on his face unusually somber. "You gotta do me a favor, Cas."

"Um, ok?" he replied, a bit taken back by the seriousness.

"I've lived with Dean for almost two years. He's one of my best friends. And if you hadn't moved in, I would have waited a few more days to go," he took a drink, "because the next few days are gonna be hard on him. And he's going to try and bury it and pretend nothing's wrong."

"I'm not sure I understand…"

"Mary Winchester died on November 2, 1983. A nightlight shorted out in Sam's nursery and set the room on fire. She died trying to save her baby. Dean's dad was passed out downstairs and didn't get what was happening at first, and by the time he realized what was going on, Dean had pulled Sam out of the burning nursery and was running down the steps with him. From what I understand, John got burned pretty bad trying to get Mary out."

Cas was silent. He'd known Dean's mom had died in a fire, but this was the first time he was hearing the details. "God, he couldn't have been very old…"

"He was about four and half, maybe a little older? But yeah, he wasn't much more than a baby himself, and he managed to get his six month old brother and himself out of a burning house. And he ain't never said anything, pretty much refuses to talk about it all, but I'd bet money that he saw her burning."
"Dear god."

"Yeah. After that, John started moving them around, leaving Dean in charge of Sam a lot, and then he started drinking - anyway, it's just a hard day for him. So, keep an eye on him. Please." Victor finished his pancakes and leaned back in the booth. "I can pretty much guarantee his Dad will call sometime tomorrow and say something stupid, since it seems to be an annual event. Just…"

"I'll keep an eye on him. I swear."

"I know you will." Victor's warm brown eyes twinkled. "He likes you, y'know. A lot."

"Umm."

"Look man, I ain't sayin' it's anything, you know, like that, but he likes you. And you spent the night with him, even if nothin' happened. But he likes you, y'know?"

Cas stared down into his coffee cup. "For what it's worth, I like him too."

"Huh."

"What?"

"Nothing, I just think you moving in was a good thing. A real good thing. You're good for him. Shit, you're the first roommate other than me that he hasn't managed to run off in under thirty days. Jeez, the last guy? Maybe two weeks if that."

"I've lived with much worse, believe me."

Ellen came by the table and grabbed their empty plates, fondly running a hand through Cas's hair as she walked away.

"Damn, she likes you too. You must be alright, Cas."

"I try," he replied drily.

"You do better than that. You're good people dude. Like I said, I'm glad you moved in."

"And I'm sorry you're moving out. I'll miss you, Victor." Castiel smiled at the man across the table from him.

"I'll miss you guys too, but to be honest? I was getting tired of coming home every night when I'd have just as soon stayed with Bela." He drained the last of his coffee and set the mug back on the table. "'sides, you guys might be glad to have me gone 'fore too long," he added with a wink.

"What?" Castiel gaped at Vic. "What are you talking about?"

"Dude, you think I didn't notice how friendly you two have been getting? Think I missed that moment on the piano bench the other night?"

"Nothing happened!"

"I know that. Just sayin'. He's comfortable with you, and it looks like more than friendship to me." Castiel opened his mouth to reply, but Victor cut him off. "Look, I'm glad! I mean, you do like dudes right?"

"Well, yes, but…"
"And I'm pretty sure Dean's not particular either way, and just...you guys work. I like it. I like knowing that I'm leaving him with this. That there's some potential brewing here." He raised an eyebrow at Cas. "Unless I'm totally wrong of course."

"You're not wrong on my end," Cas sighed. "I like him. And I've been trying to figure out how I like him. If it's, you know, more than friendship. I don't know why I'm dancing around this. He wouldn't be my first boyfriend after all. I do know that I care about him. A lot."

"I can see that, Cas. Just, if something does happen, go easy on him. He breaks easy. And he doesn't even realize it. There's been other people, girls that he thought, I dunno, thought it would go further. And he takes it hard when it falls through. He's only had one thing that you could even classify as a relationship and it only lasted about three days. So just go easy on him. Know what I mean?"

"I think so."

"Good."

Ellen brought the check then, and Victor paid it, leaving a generous tip. He made the rounds, getting hugs from Pam and Tessa, a slap on the back and a one-armed dude hug from Benny. Ellen and Bobby both hugged him, and when he pulled away, he had a white pie box in his hands.

Castiel held the door for him, and walked him back to his truck. "They act like you're moving away forever. The County's not that far."

"Eh, City people always act like the County's far away. Just how it is. 'Sides, let's be honest. I really don't know how much I'll be getting down here. With us planning a wedding, and both of us starting our post-college job hunts...hate to say it Cas, but you and Dean probably won't see a lot of me anymore."

"It's like the end of an era," Cas said quietly.

"Yup, the end of Victor Henrikson, King of Remington! Now I'm off to be the Squire of Baltimore County," he said ruefully. Vic opened the passenger door of the truck and slid the pie inside, closed the door, then turned to look back up at the firehouse. "Gonna miss this old place."

"We're going to miss you."

"Cas, it's been real man," Vic said, holding his hand out. Castiel took it and shook it firmly. "Take care of our boy, and take care of yourself."

"You too." They hugged briefly, then Victor got in the truck. He honked and waved as he drove away, and Castiel watched the truck until it disappeared around the corner.

Dean got home just after six and walked into an incredible smell. The air in the firehouse was suffused with the delicious aroma of garlic and olive oil and he didn't know what it was but he liked it. He dropped his portfolio just inside the door, leaning it up against the stairwell, then turned and locked the big doors.

Just before shutting off the lights, he caught sight of the blank Raphael canvas and grimaced at the fact that he hadn't started it yet. He was hoping to at least have it mostly finished before Christmas. And there it stood, totally blank. With a sigh, he headed up the stairs, drawn by the delicious aroma.

Cas stood at the stove, stirring something in a pot.
"What is that smell?"

"Spaghetti. My mom's recipe. From scratch with fresh tomatoes, onion, garlic, carrot and red wine." He turned and winked at Dean, "and my secret blend of herbs and spices."

"Smells amazing!" Dean dropped his backpack and walked into the kitchen. "Want me to make garlic bread?"

"Already done," Cas smiled, holding open the oven door.

"Wow! What did I do to deserve this?"

"Well, Vic moved out today, and you had a late class. I know how you get. You would have likely not eaten and just gone to bed."

"Mmm," Dean agreed, walking across the kitchen floor to stand behind Cas. He didn't know what possessed him, but he leaned forward and hooked his chin on Castiel's shoulder. "That really looks good. And I am friggin' starving. I missed lunch and like an idiot, left my wallet here, so I didn't even have vending machine money. So, yeah, starved."

Cas chuckled, his shoulder bouncing Dean's chin. "Then why don't you get a couple of plates and we'll eat this. Toss a strainer in the sink for me, while you're at it."

"Ok." Dean reluctantly lifted his chin from Cas's shoulder and went in search of the dishes.

Ten minutes later, they were curled up on the couch, a basket of sliced garlic bread between them and parmesan loaded plates full of spaghetti in their hands. The TV was on, some new show about doctors in Seattle. The lead doctor was wearing cowboy boots.

"Now, that's just ridiculous. Do you know how sore his feet would be at the end of the day? And does he have to make out with every nurse in the hospital?"

"It's compelling, Cas, I dunno."

"There has to be something better on."

"Just leave it, it's almost over."

"There's still forty minutes left. It's a train wreck." Cas put a forkful of spaghetti in his mouth and continued his tirade, slightly muffled by the food. "Don't know how they're supposed to get any doctoring done with all the kissing."

"Hey, c'mon, I don't give you crap when you watch boring as hell Law and Order all the time."

"Now that show is compelling."

"Whatev…" Dean was cut off by the portable phone's ring. "Your turn," he grinned at Cas, stuffing his face with pasta.

Castiel tossed a dark look in his direction, set his plate on the coffee table, and made his way to the kitchen for the phone. "Hello?"

Dean's attention was drawn back to the television, where Dr. Sexy was telling Dr. Piccolo that she'd better get her act together.

"Dean? It's for you. It's Sam."
"Sammy!" Dean set his plate down and forced a grin onto his face. If it was November 1st, and Sam was calling…that couldn't be anything good. "I'll be back," he said, patting Cas on the shoulder as he took the phone and went to his room, shutting the door behind him.

"What's up, Sam?"

"I just - I needed someone to talk to."

Dean frowned. "Dad acting stupid again?"

"Yeah, well you know. He's doing the pre-show for tomorrow."

"Shit." Dean flopped onto his bed, landing on his back. "He's already wasted?"

"Yup." Sam's voice was tense. "He's just. I don't even know what to do with him. I made dinner and he threw at me and I'm just, ugh, I just wish I could come now. I wish I could come live with you and forget this place."

"Me too, kiddo," Dean's heart clenched, "but you're not eighteen…"

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't make it any easier."

"He'd just come up here and take you back by force. May 2nd, Sam. Just gotta make it that long. You get anything back from the colleges you applied for?"

"No, just a 'you suck' letter from Harvard and Princeton, but I was expecting that. To be honest, I'm holding out for Hopkins or Georgetown. They're close to you…"

"That shouldn't be a deciding factor. You need to go where you're gonna get the best education." Dean stared up at his ceiling, studying the open beams and metal framework. He could picture Sam, all long limbs and shaggy hair, sprawled in a similar position on his bed back in West Virginia. "Although, Hopkins is a damn fine school. Do they have the program you need for the staring-at-old-books job?"

Sam chuckled on the other end. "The staring-at-old-books job? That's one way of putting it. I want to work as a researcher, and I need to get a degree in Anthropology, and Hopkins has a fantastic Anthro department, so yeah…"

"Oh. Ok. I don't know how all that crap works, I mean, you're the smart one."

"Don't. Don't write yourself off like that. Do you really think that asstons of creativity and your paintings add up to nothing? I mean, dude, you haven't even graduated yet, and you've been commissioned so many times that you own your own home."

"I wouldn't call the firehouse a home…"

"I would. It's more than I have in this fucking wet and broke down trailer."

A bitter curl of guilt twisted in Dean's stomach. "God, Sammy, I'd give anything to get you out of there sooner. I swear."

"I know. I didn't mean - how's Cas?" he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

"Cas is cool. I came home tonight, and he had spaghetti waiting. Like stood-at-the-stove-all-day-and-made-from-scratch-with-tomatoes spaghetti. I walked in and the smell just wafted and it tastes amazing." He chuckled, then really started talking, about everything he could think about, Cas's
smile and sense of humor, how he was a stickler for a neat and clean bathroom, how he tried to organize Dean's paints the other day, his taste in music and his passion for Chris Noth and Jerry Orbach and crime dramas in general, how much Ellen and Bobby liked him, and he just went on and on, Sam silent on the other end.

When he finally ran out of details, Sam laughed, a light and carefree sound.

"What?"

"You like him."

Dean blushed, "well, yeah," he stammered, "he's a nice guy, a good friend…"

"No, dude, you like him, like you know, like him."

"Uh…"

"What? It's awesome. My big brother's got a crush."

"Heh, well, y'know, I just. Fuck." Dean ran a hand down his face, then rolled to lie on his stomach, propping his chin on his hand. "Yeah, ok, I like him. Whatever."

"Well, does he like you?"

"I dunno, sometimes the way he looks at me and - I'm not doing this, Sam. I'm not playing the dating game with my little brother, ok?"

"Dude. Chill." There was a crash on Sam's end of the line. "Fuck," his little brother mumbled. "$I gotta go."

"OK. Talk to you later?"

"Yeah, I'll call tomorrow. Look, Dean, go easy on yourself tomorrow, ok?"

"Yeah, Sam, I'll be fine." Another crash, and Dean heard a muffled curse in his father's growly voice. "You better go, kiddo."

"Yup. Bye, Dean."

"Bye, Sam."

A click, and his brother was gone. Dean sighed, shut off the phone and tossed it on his bed. He laid there a moment more, then dragged himself off the bed and wandered back out to the living room, flopping down on the couch. The microwave beeped, and a second later, Cas handed him a steaming plate of spaghetti.

"I warmed it up for you. You were in there quite a while. Everything ok?"

Dean stabbed a fork into the pasta. "Yeah. Just, Sam's having a rough night. Y'know, when he turns eighteen in May, he's moving up here. So we don't need to look for another roommate, 'cause Sam will need that room." End credits rolled on Dr. Sexy, and Dean watched the TV, disappointed he'd missed most of the episode.

"Which reminds me, when I graduate in the spring, will I need to move out? I really don't want too."

"Nah, Cas, I ain't goin' anywhere. You can stay as long as you like."
"Wonderful," Castiel smiled at him, damnable blue eyes sparkling, and Dean's heart flip-flopped.

Sam was right. He did like him. A lot.

Now

Goddamn, but he was tired of the fucking snow. And he loved his Baby, but asstons of heavy Detroit steel on a rear-wheel drive car did not make for an easy drive on icy roads. The Impala slipped up Avondale, and complained about pulling into the driveway, rear tires spinning fretfully. Anna wasn't home, and Dean found himself rather relieved. It was Wednesday, and they still hadn't talked about the fight they had on Monday. Tuesday night had been conference night at Anna's school, and Dean had been half asleep by the time she got home.

Inside the warm little house, Dean pulled out the chicken he'd thawed the night before, along with carrots, celery, and an onion. He hit the power button on the little radio in the kitchen, and a short time later, he was humming along to *Fade to Black* as he was sautéing the vegetables in a deep Dutch oven, the beginnings of chicken and dumplings.

It was cold and miserable and damp outside, and a perfect night for some comfort food. While the chicken browned, he sorted the mail, then added the stock and turned the heat down to low so the stuff could simmer for a while.

Back in the living room, he turned on the Christmas lights, and added the last few ornaments to the tree. The garland was next, and when he was done, Dean stepped back and admired his work, finally feeling a little enthusiasm for the holidays.

A key in the lock caught his attention, and he watched with a sense of trepidation as the door opened.

Anna stepped into the house, shaking the snow from her boots. She saw Dean standing there and offered him a shy smile. "Hi, hon."

"Hey."

"How was your day?"

"Fine."

She looked at him again, as if trying to see through him. "Something smells good," she said finally, shrugging out of her coat and kicking off her boots.

"Chicken and dumplings."

"That sounds wonderful."

"Yeah. It's gross out and I just needed something warm."

She nodded, picking her bag up and walking towards the kitchen in her blue snowflake socks. He followed her back into the kitchen, busying himself with finishing dinner. When it was done, Dean dished up a bowl for her and one for himself, grabbed forks and sat down.

Anna smiled across the table at him. "This looks wonderful. I love your cooking."

"Thanks," he murmured.
They ate in silence, Anna looking like she wanted to say something, but never did. After, she took her bag into the living room to grade papers while Dean cleaned the kitchen. When he was done, he sat at the table to work on the following week's lesson plans.

It was a very quiet night, both of them in separate rooms, Dean feeling unsettled the better part of the evening. They went to bed at the same time, both lying on their backs on their separate sides of the bed.

"The tree looks nice," Anna said unexpectedly. "You did a nice job."

"Thanks," Dean muttered.

Anna sighed.

"And dinner was delicious. You're a great cook."

"Thanks, I'm glad you liked it," he replied woodenly.

She was quiet, and they laid there, neither one saying anything. The tension was thick and icy cold. Dean was miserable and he didn't know what to do about it.

"Dean, baby, I'm so sorry." Anna said finally. "I don't know what got into me. I guess I just reacted and then I said the worst possible things I could think of."

He said nothing.

"I know you hate it when I minimalize your job, and I feel horrible. I was mad, and I went for the one thing that I knew would upset you. I can't tell you how many times I've ripped my own family members for saying crap like that. Your job is important, art education is important. And I've seen you in action. You're a great teacher." She rolled over, propping herself up so she could look at him, warm brown eyes intense in the low light of the bedroom. "I've been beating myself up since Monday night. I'm so sorry."

Dean could see the sincerity in her eyes, and he felt the coldness in the air thaw a bit. "I shoulda told you. I should have taken you with me Saturday."

"It's ok. We both messed up. I shouldn't have reacted like that." She reached out and cupped his cheek. "I love you so much. It freaked me out, that there might be this other person out there…I reacted badly. I'm sorry. It doesn't matter if you like guys too, it doesn't."

"Anna…"

"No, it doesn't. You're with me now, and we're getting married. It doesn't matter what you did in the past. God, Dean, I'm so fucking sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. I should have told you. You shouldn't have found out like that." He reached up and took her hand, pulling it against his chest, reaching up with his other hand to push a piece of her red hair behind her ear. "I love you," he said softly.

Anna beamed, and leaned in for a kiss. "Love you too," she whispered against his lips. She kissed him again, a bit more forceful this time, each kiss growing in intensity until Dean found himself breathing hard.

She stripped away his sweats and tee shirt, apology in her hands with every movement, kissing away her harsh words, touching him softly, Dean allowing himself to be swept away. Anna climbed on top
when they were both naked, settling down on his cock, warm and wet, and deliciously tight around him.

Dean gasped, reaching up to grab her hips, his fingers sinking into her creamy skin. She rode him hard and fast, reaching down behind to run her fingers over his balls, pushing him closer and closer to orgasm with every movement, every thrust of her body against his.

She leaned down to kiss him, her tongue pushing roughly inside his mouth. Anna was close, he could tell, and he was skating the edge. "Dean, Dean," she panted in his ear. Dean wrapped his arms around her waist, flipping them both, pulling Anna's leg up over his shoulder, driving in relentlessly, chasing his own orgasm.

Anna screamed as she came, fingernails drawing tracks down his back, and god he was so fucking close -

He looked down at her, but he didn't see her. For just a second, a frozen moment in time, he was staring down into blue eyes, staring at sexed out dark brown hair, for just a moment, he was staring at Cas.

Dean tumbled over the edge with scream and curse, collapsing onto Anna's chest. His arms and legs were shaking, and not just from the orgasm.

Oh god, he was fucked. He was fucked in every way possible.

And he had no idea what the hell he was supposed to do about it.
Chapter Notes

Mentions of drug and alcohol use, self-harm.

Friday morning, Dean woke up with a stomach completely twisted in knots. It was so bad, he had his cell phone in his hand and was dialing the number for the school, intending to call out, before he realized what a total and complete child he was being. With a sigh, he hung up the phone and dragged his sorry ass out of bed and into the shower.

Tonight was the night, the big night, the dinner with Cas night. He was so nervous, hours before it was going to happen, that he had no idea how the hell he was going to make it through the dinner itself.

Anna was in the kitchen making coffee, when Dean finally managed to drag himself downstairs. She looked beautiful, in a bright green sweater and long denim skirt, and she smiled and handed him a mug, which he took gratefully. "You look beat."

"Didn't sleep well."

"I'm sorry, babe. Wish I could stick around and make you breakfast, but I have got to get moving. I'll see you later. Hopefully, your day will be better than your night was."

"Yeah, here's hoping."

"See you tonight. I'm really excited to meet your friend," she added, forcing a smile onto her face. She turned and opened the door.

"Anna…"

"Yeah?" she asked, turning back to him, the sunlight streaming through the open door turning her red hair to a blaze.

"I can cancel."

She seemed to consider this for a moment. "No, it's fine. I want to meet him. I'll see you later," she said, stepping out onto the porch and closing the door, effectively silencing his protests.

Several hours later, he was on his lunch break, classroom empty, and sorting through the finished still-lifes the kids in his Fine Arts class had turned in. Most of them were incredible. The kids in Fine Arts were there because they wanted to be, and pretty much all of them were incredibly talented.

He was closely examining the shadowing effect Kevin Tran had used when a book was dropped loudly on his desk, and Dean jumped.

Charlie giggled.

"Damn it, Charlie, what have I told you about sneaking up on me?"
"It's so easy, Winchester. I can't resist."

Dean took in her shit eating grin and sighed. "What do you want, Bradbury?"

"Who says I want anything?" she asked, feigning hurt.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Ok, fine, you got me. So tonight's the big night, right?"

"Charlie…"

"What? Dinner with Castiel Dreamy Novak. It's exciting."

Dean rolled his eyes and shook his head. He pushed his chair away from the desk and stood. "I need some lunch."

"Ooh, me too, I'll come with you!" she chirped.

"Swell."

"C'mon, it's Friday, pizza day, one of the few days I buy lunch in this crap hole." She pulled out her phone and started tapping away on it, letting out a low dammit.

"What?" he asked, waving at Pete Evans, one of the gym teachers.

"Friggin' Sam! There is no beating him on Words with Friends! I should have never agreed to play with him."

Dean laughed, holding the cafeteria door open for her while she fired off an angry text to his brother.

"I give up! I need a new game."

"There's no beating an overeducated Sasquatch. C'mon, your highness, let's get some pizza."

They walked through the cafeteria, many students yelling out his name and waving. Charlie got just as much attention and a gawky kid named Garth pulled her aside to show her something on his iPad. By the time she caught up with him, Dean had already purchased his lunch and hers, handing her a tray.

Back in his classroom, he tuned his little radio to 100.7 and both of them settled in to enjoy their lunches. Def Leppard's Rock of Ages drifted through the room.

"Don't you get tired of cock rock?" Charlie asked around a mouthful of pizza.

"Don't you get tired of talking with your mouth full?" Dean shot back. She stuck her tongue out. "Oh yeah, Bradbury, that's mature."

They chewed in silence for a while, the music changing to Pink Floyd's The Wall. Dean cleaned up his lunch, quietly singing under his breath. Standing, he took the pile of paintings and organized them into a neat stack. He then moved the stack of still-lifes to his portfolio, packing them carefully to take home and grade.

"There's something very ironic about a teacher singing 'we don't need no education'."

"Shuddup," he grinned.
"So are you excited?" Charlie asked.

"Yeah, I guess."

He said nothing else, and she studied him closely. "You're nervous, dude, look at you."

"I am not nervous," Dean scoffed.

"Oh, you totally are. Like totally. You're scared you're gonna crawl over the table and mack on Mr. Angel of Thursday right in front of Anna." Charlie's eyes were sparkling with mischief.

"You are a pain in my ass, you know that?"

"Well, I'm just saying. If that book has any amount of truth in it," Dean groaned loudly, but she kept going, "then you guys had some pretty hot times back in the day, right?"

He sank back into his chair, and buried his head in his arms. "Dear god, please stop."

"And I mean, some of the stuff he wrote about, I mean, dude, you were gone on him. Gone."

"Charlie…"

"And I know I wouldn't take Dorothy to dinner with Gilda, y'know what I mean? It's creepy. And probably inappropriate."

"Is this supposed to be advice?" He asked, sitting up and staring at her. "'Cause it kinda sucks."

"Look, I'm just trying to be realistic." She launched herself out of the chair and started pacing the classroom. "First, Cas was apparently your first really, really serious relationship. It says so in the book."

"Fiction, Charlie," he reminded her, but she kept going.

"Second, he was there through some pretty crazy times in your life, if I'm matching the events up right. But then, I'm not sure about all of it, because David and Carver end up pretty happy, and clearly, you guys didn't, and…"

"Charlie, please," Dean said quietly. "Please stop."

She froze, stopped pacing, and turned to look at him, a chastened expression on her face. "Oh," she murmured. "I'm sorry. I'm pretty good at running my mouth, aren't I?"

"It's ok. I just…"

"You loved him, didn't you?"

Dean stared down at his desk. "Yes," he whispered.

"I'm sorry, Dean. I shouldn't have…I got carried away."

He nodded woodenly.

"I should go," she said quietly. "Dean…just, I didn't mean to…"

"I know."

Charlie sighed, gathered their trays and left the room.
Cas pedaled his bike up Remington, already soaked through from the rain that was pouring down from the angry grey sky. He couldn't get to the firehouse fast enough, and when he did get there, Cas was dismayed to find the door locked. Muttering a curse, he dropped his backpack onto the ground, digging through it and quickly finding the key. He unlocked the door, shoving it open and tossing his backpack through, then grabbing his Schwinn and forcing it through as well.

The interior of the firehouse was as dark as the outside. It was after eight, but that was hardly late by firehouse standards. He'd thought he'd find Dean working on the Raphael canvas. The other man had complained about it the day before, lamenting that he hadn't started it yet.

Remembering what Vic had said about Dean and November 2nd, Castiel scooped up his backpack and headed up the stairs. If Dean wasn't home yet, he'd go ahead and get some kind of dinner going. Dean had really seemed to enjoy the homemade spaghetti he'd made yesterday, and he knew he had the ingredients for several other dishes in the fridge. Cas had also purchased the supplies to make his mom's sweet potato pie, and was looking forward to surprising Dean with it, especially knowing how Dean felt about pie.

Upstairs was dark and quiet, and Castiel confirmed that Dean didn't appear to be home. He dropped his backpack in his bedroom, and stripped out of his coat, hoodie, and wet jeans, pulling on a ratty old pair of black sweats and a dry UMBC hoodie.

Back in the kitchen, he pulled out a Dutch oven and set it on the burner, turning the stove on to medium. Cas pulled chicken, celery, carrots, and onion out next, and set to work chopping all of the ingredients. It was wet, cold, and disgusting outside. A day like that called for comfort food. He hoped Dean would enjoy his chicken and dumplings.

Just before he put the chicken into the pot, he heard an odd noise from the bathroom. Castiel frowned, and turned the heat down. In the bathroom, he flicked on the light.

The room appeared to be empty, his and Dean's stall doors hanging open, and the shower curtain was pulled back. Shutting the light off, he walked back into the common area.

A weird feeling settled in his stomach. Dean should have been home already. He didn't have class after three, and he wasn't scheduled to work that night. Castiel picked up the portable phone and called Dean's cell. It rang once and went to voice mail. Frowning, he disconnected and dialed the number to the Roadhouse from memory.

"Roadhouse," Jo's bored voice answered.

"Hello, Jo. It's Castiel. I was wondering if you'd seen Dean."

"Nope," she said brusquely. "Try Benny's."

"Ok, thank you."

"Yup."

He disconnected the call and dialed Benny's number.

"Benny's Place," came the warm honeyed drawl.
"Benny, it's Castiel. Have you seen Dean?"

"Sure haven't. You check the Roadhouse?"

"Yes, they haven't seen him either."

"Huh. I dunno, brotha. If I see him, I'll tell him you're lookin' for him."

"Ok, thank you."

"No problem, darlin'."

Setting the phone down on the counter, Cas realized he was actually quite worried about his friend. He didn't know what to do about it, and decided to just go ahead and finish dinner. Half an hour later, the pot was bubbling, and the good smell filled the kitchen.

It was now after nine, however, and still no Dean. Castiel frowned as he looked at the clock. He tried Dean's cell again, but it still went straight to voice mail. He checked Dean's room, and Victor's old one, even his own. Still no Dean.

He was really starting to worry.

Dinner was done, and he turned the heat down to low, covering the pot. Castiel made his way into the bathroom again, answering the call of nature. He was on his way back out when he heard an odd snuffling noise.

Cas turned slowly, an odd chill running down his spine, as he stared back into the bathroom. There was no one there; the first three stalls were empty, the doors hanging open. He stepped further into the room, back where the laundry area and old lockers were.

Castiel found Dean.

His friend was flat on his back in a puddle of vomit, his cell phone next to him, a pill bottle and a fifth of Jack Daniels lying empty on the floor.

"Oh my god," Cas whispered, dashing across the floor. He hit his knees near Dean's shoulder, gently scooping his head into his lap. "Dean. Dean, wake up. Dean!" Dean's head lolled in his lap. "Dean, please. God, please wake up. Please." Cas shook him gently, but Dean didn't flinch, didn't respond.

Castiel put his fingers on Dean's neck, searching for a pulse, and was relieved when he found one. He had Dean's cell in his hand and was about to dial 911 when Dean's hand shot out and grabbed his wrist.

"Don't," he rasped. "I threw it all up. Don't call, please, Cas." His voice was weak and raspy, but his eyes were open, bloodshot green staring up at him. "They'll call my dad and lock me up, god… please don't call, Cas."

Cas hesitated, the phone still in his hands. Dean's eyes were wrecked, pleading. Sighing, he set the phone down on a clean section of the floor. "Against my better judgment…ok. But we're going to get you cleaned up. And then you're going to tell me why you drank so much alcohol with," Castiel picked up the pill bottle, "sleeping pills? God, Dean, what the hell were you thinking?"

"I dunno…" he murmured.

Cas shook his head. "C'mon, let's get you up." He stood, reaching down for Dean. He helped him to
his feet, and the other man wobbled, but managed to stay up. "Strip. I'll get the water going, and clean up while you shower. Leave your clothes on the floor."

He left Dean in the locker room, and went to the shower, turning on the hot water and letting the steam fill the room. Cas leaned up against the wall, and wiped a hand down his face. His hands were shaking. Finding Dean like that- it was one of the scariest things that had ever happened to him.

Dean came around the corner in his boxers, a sheepish expression on his face.

"Get in," Cas barked.

He nodded and stepped into the shower, drawing the curtain across and tossing his boxers out into the room. Castiel grabbed them and went back to the locker room, starting the washer at the far end. He dumped a liberal amount of soap into the drum. Gathering Dean's clothes, he pulled his wallet out of the soiled jeans and dumped the whole load into the machine. He used several towels to clean up the vomit, and dropped them in as well.

Slamming the lid shut, he leaned up against the washer, swallowing a sob. He let the tears run freely, but he wasn't going to let Dean hear him crying.

As if on cue, the water stopped, and a rough voice called his name. Castiel grabbed another fresh towel, and walked back to the shower. "Here," he said, shoving it through the curtain.

"Thanks," Dean murmured. He pulled back the curtain a moment later, skin flushed from the heat of the shower and a shamed expression on his face. Cas tried not to look too close at the miles of wet, tattooed skin on display.

"Go get dressed. I made dinner."

"Ok," Dean said quietly. He stopped just outside the bathroom. "Cas? Look I'm..." he trailed off, staring at the floor.

"Just go get dressed," Cas said gently.

Dean nodded, and left the room.

It was a very quiet night. Castiel didn't bring up what happened in the bathroom. At all. He simply wrapped Dean in a blanket and stationed him on the couch with a bowl of chicken and dumplings. It was delicious, warm and comforting, but Dean couldn't eat, he just pushed the food around the bowl. He finally gave up, and sat it on the coffee table.

Castiel's eyes followed the mostly full bowl, but he didn't say anything when Dean set it on the table.

He wasn't asking questions, wasn't demanding an explanation, and that was making Dean insane. For the first time in his life, he found himself wanting to explain, wanting to tell Castiel everything. They ate in silence, Castiel pushing him back onto the couch when he tried to help him clean up.

"Just sit. I've got it."

So Dean sat. He stared out the window at the rain, flinching when a particularly close boom of thunder rattled the windows.

Dean stared at his cell phone, sitting innocuously on the coffee table. One phone call and he'd almost done the unthinkable. He'd almost ended it. Would have too, if his body hadn't taken over. What was he thinking? What would Sam have done if he'd succeeded? God, was he really that weak?
He didn't even realize he was crying until Cas sat on the coffee table across from him and reached out to thumb a few tears off his cheek. The gesture was so intimate, so loving, it took Dean by surprise, and the next thing he knew, he was wrapped in Cas's arms, sobbing, shaking, clinging to Cas with everything he had.

"Dean, what is it, what's wrong? Please talk to me." Cas slid onto the couch, never letting go, and Dean just clung tighter. "What happened, Dean?"

"Who says that? Who says that to their own kid?" Dean sobbed.

"Says what? What happened?" Cas's bright blue eyes were wide and concerned. "Please talk to me, Dean." Dean shook his head, tossed off the blanket, pushed Cas away and pulled himself to his feet. "Dean?"

"I can't. I can't," he whispered. Walking across the floor, he stood at the window, staring down into Remington Avenue, watching as the torrential downpour swept down the street, moving too fast for the storm drains.

Tears still rolled down his cheeks, and he swiped them away angrily. "Cas, if you had a kid, would you…" Dean trailed off, unwilling to give his scrambled and twisted thoughts breath.

A hand landed on his shoulder. "Talk to me. Maybe it will help."

Dean turned. "I know what would help," he murmured, and he reached out for Cas, grabbed his hoodie with both hands and pulled him closer. He pressed their mouths together, licking at the seam of Cas's lips, trying to force the other man to open his mouth.

Cas pushed back, pushed him away. "What are you doing?" he growled.

"Like you don't want this," Dean hissed, attempting to pull Castiel in again.

"Not like this," he stated firmly, pushing Dean back. "Not when you're so upset you don't even know what you're doing!" Castiel moved away from Dean. "I'm trying to help you. This wouldn't help you."

"How the fuck do you know? How do you know what I need? Maybe I just need someone to bend me over a table and fuck me! Maybe I just need to feel fucking wanted for once! Maybe I just need someone to give a fuck about me for two minutes!"

"I do care about you! That's why I'm not letting you do this! I won't take advantage of you like this, Dean!"

Anger flared up inside him, and Dean grabbed the first thing his hands found and flung it against the wall. His 1959 Les Paul Gibson guitar hit the wall hard. The neck separated from the body, and Dean watched in horror as it hit the ground, all the anger leaving him in a whoosh.

He sank to his knees where he stood, the sobs taking him down again, and Cas was there in an instant, strong arms wrapping tight against him. "It's ok, Dean, whatever it is, it's going to be ok."

"Oh god, Cas, that was my mom's! I broke my mom's guitar." Dean wrapped his hands into Cas's hoodie and sobbed. "What the hell is wrong with me?" he howled.

"You're upset. Because it's the anniversary of your mother's death and you're having a bad day. But something happened. Please tell me what happened. Please, Dean."
Dean snuffled, hiding his face in Cas's hoodie. "Who tells their fucking kid they wish they were dead? Who says that, Cas?" Dean was shaking again, the memory of his father's words buzzing in his head.

_I wish it had been you. I wish your mother had lived instead of you. Every time I look at you, I see her. Why wasn't it you, Dean? Why did you get to live and she had to die?_

It didn't matter that the man was drunk. Dean knew John Winchester had meant every word.

"Your father called," Cas said flatly. "And he said that to you? That he wished you were dead?"

Dean nodded.

"That is. That is just. That's incredibly fucked up." He tightened his grip on Dean, holding him as close as he could. "That's why you drank the whiskey with the pills? You wanted to give him what he wanted?"

"Yeah. I don't know what I was thinking."

"You weren't thinking. God, Dean. I should have stayed home with you today. I thought about it. Victor warned me yesterday that today would be hard for you. I should have stayed home."

Dean sniffled. "It's ok. Not your fault."

"It's not your fault, either, you know? The fire? It's not your fault that you lived and your mother didn't."

"It feels like my fault. He makes it feel like my fault." Dean sniffled.

"No, it's not. You were practically a baby yourself. Do you know what a miracle it is that you got Sam and yourself out? You saved your brother, Dean. That's a miracle."

He didn't say anything else, just kept his tight hold on Dean, rocking him slightly. Dean eventually stopped crying, and Cas got him up off the floor and back onto the couch, wrapping the blanket around him again. Dean let Castiel pull him into his arms.

They sat like that for a long time, Dean slowly calming down. He leaned against Cas, his head on his shoulder, imagining that he could absorb the comfort Cas was offering.

"I'm sorry I'm such a fucked up mess. Bet you wish you'd never moved in."

"Stop beating yourself up. I like you. And I'm glad I moved in." The arm around his back squeezed him a little tighter. "I'm sorry that I wasn't here when he called."

"It's ok."

"I shouldn't have left you alone, Dean. Not after Victor told me how hard today would be."

Dean snuggled closer into Cas's warmth. "I'm sorry I kissed you," he said abruptly.

To his surprise, Cas chuckled. "That part would have been ok under other circumstances."

Dean felt his cheeks pink. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," Cas smiled at him in the dark. His hand snaked under the blanket and found Dean's, and he threaded their fingers together. "Maybe sometime we should try that again, ok?"
"Ok," he said quietly.

They sat in the dark and watched the thunderstorm rage, hands wound together and a comfortable silence wrapped around them. A warm stirring of hope settled in Dean's belly, and he let himself relax, let the tiredness wash over him.

The last thing he remembered was the feel of soft lips on his forehead, as he drifted off into peaceful sleep.
Dean woke slowly, warm and comfortable, sun streaming through the windows. He rolled to his side, away from the sun, and found Cas lying there, blue eyes twinkling, a smile on his face.

"Good morning," he said quietly, in that gravelly tone of his.

"Morning," Dean smiled back. He stretched, taking in the fact that he was in Cas's room, in Cas's bed. "Didn't I fall asleep on the couch?"

"Yes. But I moved you in here. I thought it would be more comfortable. You're cute when you're asleep." Dean blushed. "Actually, you're cute all the time. Especially when you blush like that."

Dean's face flamed all the more, and he twisted his face into the pillow.

"Hey. Don't hide."

"I'm embarrassed," Dean grumbled. "Made an idiot of myself last night."

"It turned out ok, but yeah, can you not do that again, please?"

"I'm sorry, Cas. I shouldn't have let him get to me like that. I shouldn't have even answered the phone."

He turned his head on the pillow, admiring the way the sunlight lit Cas's eyes. Blue depths twinkled back at him, and Dean felt short of breath. He was gorgeous. His friend was gorgeous.

"You're not the only one who has issues with their family, you know? I don't know if I've told you directly, but I'm gay. And my parents are ultra-conservative. I've never brought anyone home because I knew it wouldn't be pretty. My dad is definitely more open-minded than my mom, and Michael and Gabriel have been very supportive, but Lucifer…well, he's a piece of work, and Mom refuses to allow us to explain it to Raphael. So, yes, my family, myself, I have problems too. It's all in how you manage it."

Dean grinned. "I knew you were gay though."

"You did?"

"Yeah. That first day, when Vic introduced us? You couldn't stop staring at my chest."

Cas blushed, something Dean had yet to see him do, and it created a warm feeling in his core.

"Well, all those tattoos…and you were shirtless after all, and you're not exactly hard on the eyes." Cas chuckled. "But what about you? Are you gay?"

"I don't think so. I thought I was pretty straight until recently, but now I just - I don't know. I think I'm probably open to finding love in all places at this point."

"What makes you think that?"

Dean smiled. "You."
Castiel reached across the bed, gently running his fingers down Dean's cheek. They moved slowly closer to each other, Cas propping up on his elbow, hovering over him. "Cas, I don't - I don't know what I'm doing here", he whispered.

"Don't worry. I'm just going to…" his eyes slipped shut, as he moved in closer, and Dean closed his eyes as well. This was it. This was the moment when the friendship would end, and something new would begin, and…

…the doorbell buzzed.

"Seriously?" Cas groaned.

Dean chuckled. "Hold that thought. I'll get rid of whoever it is, then you and me can get back to - whatever this is," he smiled.

Cas dramatically pulled a pillow over his face. "Hurry back," he mumbled, voice muffled by the pillow.

With a smile on his face, Dean left the room. In the living room, he grabbed onto the fire pole and slid to the bottom, still smiling like an idiot as he swaggered over to the door, but, when he opened the door, the smile disappeared.

A tall, gangly mass of limbs stood on the other side, ratty duffel thrown over his shoulder, and a great purple and yellow bruise blooming on his cheek. He stared at Dean through bloodshot eyes, a mass of chestnut colored bangs hanging over his forehead.

"Sammy?" Dean whispered.

His brother's shattered hazel eyes filled with tears. "Please don't make me go back. Please, Dean."

Sam Winchester was taller than Dean, by several inches, handsome like his brother, but in a different way. Despite his longer hair, his features were sharper, slightly more masculine than Dean's plush, full lips and softly rounded cheeks. He had the beginnings of an impressive set of muscles combined with the incongruous expression of an overgrown puppy.

Dean had brought him upstairs, an apology in his eyes for Cas, which he waved off completely. Sam was family, and he clearly needed Dean, judging by the ugly shiner on his left eye and the way he was clinging to his older brother. His jerky movements were telling as well, especially the way he was cradling his left side.

They settled Sam on the couch with a fresh cup of coffee and a blanket over his shoulders. To Cas, he looked exhausted. Dean sat on the couch beside him, with his own coffee cup, and he was watching Sam carefully, his shoulders rigid and tense.

"How did you get here, Sammy?"

"Hitched."

Dean's face paled. "Dad hit you?" he asked softly.

Sam nodded miserably, sipping his coffee. "I told him off for what he said to you. It started as a screaming match and then it got physical. He took a swing at me, and I blocked that one, and then it just got violent. He started hitting me with anything he could find. I tried to fight back, but that old fucker's strong when he wants to be, and next thing I know, I'm lying on the floor staring up at the
Dean's face darkened, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Then what?"

"Then he kicked me. Twice," Sam chuckled bitterly. "So when I could get up again, I grabbed as much shit as I could, found as much of my school records as I could, shot record, birth certificate, anything I thought I might need, because I can't," his voice broke and his eyes filled with tears. "I can't go back, Dean."

Dean reached out and wrapped an arm around Sam's shoulder, pulling him close. Sam twisted in his grip and buried his face in Dean's neck. "I'm not going to send you back. But Dad might - he might make trouble for us."

"How old are you, Sam?" Cas asked softly, sitting down on Sam's other side.

"Be eighteen May 2nd. Why?" He sniffled loudly.

"My brother, Michael - he's a lawyer. I can call him. Maybe there's something we can do, maybe file for emancipation or something. It might mean testifying against your dad. But we have to do something, or they'll probably try and put you in foster care of some sort. Would you like me to call Michael and see if he can come for dinner? He works here in the city."

Sam looked at Dean, and Dean nodded. "That's a great idea, Cas. I'd really appreciate that."

"OK. Are you hungry? I could make breakfast, or run to Ellen's and get something for us."

"Yeah, why don't you grab a mess of pancakes and bacon, and I'll get Sammy in the shower while you're gone. OK?"

Cas nodded, and stood, leaving the room to get dressed. On his way back out, he looked at Sam and Dean, wrapped around each other on the couch, two broken boys clinging to the last solid thing they really had in the world, and he felt an unexpected rush of affection for both of them.

Breakfast first, then he was going to call his brother. He was going to help the Winchester brothers. No matter what it took.

Now

Dean shifted uncomfortably on a padded bench, picking at the fried calamari on his plate. The restaurant was beautiful, right up Anna's alley, but Dean couldn't have felt much more out of place. He wasn't a city guy anymore, and this part of North Charles was entirely too close to his old neighborhood and his former life with Cas. Sure, the food was good, except for the fact that it was getting stuck in his dry mouth, and Anna and Cas were hitting it off, so that was good, too.

Their past was being carefully avoided, as Anna, in a gorgeous royal blue sheath, discussed UMBC with Cas. She'd graduated two years behind him, but they were both English majors, and had had many of the same professors. They were currently laughing over the apparent lack of proper beard cleanliness of one Professor Alvin Myers.

There was an element of star-struck in the way Anna looked at Cas. He was a famous author, after all, and alumnus of the same school she'd gone to. Anna was brought up, primed really, by her parents to be a teacher. It was what she knew she would do from the time she was a small child, but - she wanted to be a writer. Dean was one of the only people in the world that knew about the completed manuscripts wasting away on her laptop. And she was just as talented as Cas, in her own
He knew he should be pleased that they were getting along. Cas looked very nice, in a black on black pinstriped suit and a blue tie that lit up his eyes. In all actuality, he and Anna looked as though they had dressed to complement each other. Dean was wearing the dark grey suit Anna had bought him for his birthday the previous year and a blood red tie, and he looked wholly unremarkable. At least in his opinion, anyway.

Dean pushed the remains of his polenta around his plate. He honestly didn't think he'd ever been this uncomfortable.

"So how did you two meet?" Cas asked, draining his glass of wine.

Anna giggled. Dean looked over at her, his eyebrow raised. She actually fucking giggled.

"Well, I teach English at Parkville Middle, and I'm the eighth grade advisor, so I was one of the teachers that took them on their orientation tour of the high school. Dean was one of the teachers leading the tour. I guess we just hit it off, and I asked him out. The rest is history, right hon?"

"Yeah," he murmured, his voice rough from disuse.

"That's lovely," Cas said, poking at his veal. "It's a sweet story. How long have you been together?"

"About two years," Anna chirped happily. She drained the last of her wine, "and it's been a wonderful two years. I've never been happier."

"And how are Victor and Sam?" he asked, obviously trying to pull Dean into the conversation.

"They're fine," he said shortly. Cas and Anna both looked disappointed at his answer. An odd pain settled in Dean's gut, and he pushed his dinner plate away, leaning back against the bench.

"I'll be back in a moment. Too much wine," Anna winked, as she stood and headed for the ladies room.

Dean stared down at his plate, unwilling to meet Cas's eyes. He hoped Anna wouldn't be long, because the level of uncomfortableness this dinner had reached was quickly overwhelming him.

"Dean? Are you ok?"

"I'm fine," he mumbled, not looking up.

"No you're not."

"Why does it matter?"

Cas sighed, "it matters. I don't want you to be uncomfortable, and I can tell by looking at you that you are."

He felt a rush of anger, and he looked up at Cas. "How the hell would you know?" he asked angrily.

"Dean…"

"No. You don't get to do this, you don't get to pop up and act like you still fuckin'…" he trailed off, as Anna came back around the corner, sliding into her side of the bench.

"I hear the desserts are good here," she said pleasantly, smiling as a waiter refilled her wine. If she
noticed the tension at the table, she didn't say anything. "So are you here visiting family, or just here for the book signing?"

Dean poked at his plate again, spearing a black olive with his fork.

"Actually, I was planning on moving back."

A rush of cold water in his lap, and Dean yelped and jumped from his seat, his water goblet spilling its contents over the edge of the table. Anna's eyes were wide, and he absolutely refused to meet Cas's gaze. Dean snatched the fabric napkin off the table, and swiped at his pants. The silence around him was deafening and he chanced a look around the restaurant. Literally every eye in the place was on him, some amused, some concerned, but all looking at him like he didn't belong.

His cheeks flamed, and he mumbled something about the bathroom, stumbling back over another chair on his way there. Dean had never wished harder for the floor to open up and swallow him whole, as he wound his way through other diners and staff members, desperate for the privacy of the bathroom.

Relieved that the room was empty, he grabbed a wad of paper towels and ran them under the cold water. He pressed them against his hot cheeks, trying to ignore the sting of tears in his eyes. That was pissing him off more than anything, the thought that he felt like crying over this whole stupid, ridiculous situation.

So Cas wanted to move back to Baltimore. So fucking what? He grew up here, he had every right to the town, hell he had more right to it than Dean did. And Baltimore was a big place. Most likely Cas would get some twee little row house or condo or some shit down here in the city. Dean rarely came to the city. He was a county boy now, after all.

He grabbed the edges of the sink, his head hanging.

Well, this was just great. He could just imagine what Anna must be thinking and what they were going to talk about on the way home. He should have never agreed to this damn dinner. He should have just told Cas thanks, but no thanks.

Hell, if he was being honest, he never should have showed up at that damn book signing. That's when everything started falling apart. He was getting married, for Christ's sake! He had no business looking up old loves.

Dean sighed again. This night couldn't get much worse. He should probably get out there and try and do some damage control. He was turning to go when the door opened, and Cas pushed into the bathroom.

"What the hell?" Anna whispered.

Castiel smiled reassuringly at the pretty redhead sitting across from him. "I'll go make sure he's ok," he said, laying his napkin on the table. "Be right back."

Anna nodded, clear distrust in her eyes as she looked up at him, but he ignored it, heading to the back of the restaurant.

Dean was standing at the door when he walked in, looking like he was about to leave the bathroom, his cheeks still painted bright red. He startled and took a step back. "What are you doing in here?"

"Just came to see if you were ok."
The other man scoffed. "Yeah, right."

"Dean, I'm not trying to cause trouble for you here. I swear. I just wanted to catch up."

Dean paced away from him, grabbing a wad of towels, pressing them against his crotch. "Right. I hear you." His voice was strained, and he turned away, facing the trash can and very deliberately not looking at Cas.

Even after all this time, he could still read him. The slump in his shoulders, the avoiding his eyes, and the dipped chin - he was horrendously uncomfortable, and he wanted to run, wanted to leave the restaurant and go.

He should have known. This was the last kind of place to bring Dean Winchester. The Dean he remembered liked low key, cozy places. Hole in the wall joints, like Ellen's Roadhouse. He never went in for the fancy stuff, preferring places where his jeans and band tees were welcome. Where the menu included short stacks and cheeseburgers, meals ended with a large piece of pie.

This place was as far from Dean's comfort zone as it could possibly be.

"Dean, I'm sorry. You've been uncomfortable all night. I know you don't like places like this. I should have chosen somewhere different."

"You know I don't like places like this? Dammit, Cas," he growled, spinning to face him, "you don't know me anymore! It's been twelve fucking years!"

"You've changed that much? Really?"

Dean glared at him, fire in his green eyes. "Yeah, maybe I have!"

"Really? So you don't still love beer? And pie? Burgers, Led Zeppelin, Dr. Sexy? You don't still love sleeping in on Saturday mornings?" With each question, Cas felt bolder, stepping closer to Dean, until he was less than a foot from him.

"Dammit, Cas, personal space, man. C'mon," Dean shifted, flattening himself against the bathroom wall. His eyes darkened, pupils dilating slightly. "So what if I still like those things? Doesn't mean I'm the same guy. You left me, remember?"

"You didn't leave me much choice, now, did you?" He stepped closer, so close to Dean now that he could feel his breath.

"Fuck you," Dean growled, pressing himself flat against the bathroom wall.

Oh god, he wanted to kiss him. Dean was breathing hard, his chest heaving, and if he tried to tell Cas he wasn't turned on, there was no way in hell he'd believe him. His eyes were narrowed and dark, pupils huge.

"I hate you," he hissed. "I hate that I've got my life all figured out and you think you get to just waltz up in here and everything will go back to how it was before. It doesn't work like that, Cas. You left. You fucking left me. And it took years for me to get right. You don't get to fuck me up like this again." He put his hands on Cas's chest and shoved. "Fuck you, you fucking asshole. Fuck you."

Cas stumbled back under the force of Dean's shove. "Dean…"

"No. I'm not doing this, I'm not playing this fucking game with you. I'm going to go back out there and finish my dinner, then me and Anna are going home. And that's it. I mean it. Don't call me, don't
show up at my school, just fucking fuck off, Cas."

He balled up his paper towel and tossed it in the can.

"We finish this dinner, and we go our separate ways. Understood?"

"Yes, Dean. Whatever you want," Cas said sadly.

Dean stared at him, his eyes angry, distrustful, and he nodded once, turned and left the bathroom. He watched Dean storm out, and he deflated, all the breath in his lungs leaving in a rush.

That really couldn't have gone much worse.

The rest of the dinner was strained and uncomfortable. Dean stared at his plate, ate his dessert with mechanical detachment. Anna did her level best to keep a pleasant conversation going, and Castiel was grateful to her for that.

She was truly a lovely woman, poised and graceful, sweet and kind. She gushed about his work, flattering him with her pretty words, made him smile with her amusing anecdotes about her students, and in general kept the mood light. And that couldn't have been easy, sitting next to the moody mess that was Dean Winchester.

He paid the bill, leaving a generous tip, then waited with them while the valet brought Anna's little blue Honda.

"Well, it was lovely to meet you, Castiel," Anna said with a smile and a hug. "And thank you for dinner."

"My pleasure," he smiled.

Dean held the door for her, shutting it when she was settled, and moved around to the driver's side.

"Dean?"

The other man ignored him, opening the door and sliding inside. He didn't look back as he maneuvered the car out onto Charles Street.

"Sir? We have your cab," the valet told him.

He spared one last look at the retreating taillights of the Honda and sighed. Cas climbed into the cab, told the cabbie the name of his hotel, and leaned back against the seat.

All in all, it was an epic failure of a meal.

And any hope he might have had of winning Dean back was slowly slipping away.
The nightmares came back after that disaster of a dinner.

Driving home with Anna that night had been uncomfortable at best. She was more than aware that something had happened in the bathroom, but seemed unwilling to push and prod and drag answers out of Dean. He was pretty sure she was afraid of the answers and was certain she'd be happier not knowing. Not that anything had happened, although…

No. He didn't want to even think about it.

They'd simply gone home, put pajamas on, and crawled into bed; Anna on her side, facing away from Dean, and Dean on his back, staring at the ceiling for the better part of the night. When he finally dropped off, he dreamt of Cas, of fighting with him, screaming *I don't love you* and watching his face crumble. He dreamt of being on a bed, unable to move and feeling helpless and terrified.

Dean woke gasping, hands shaking and hair soaked with sweat, annoyed that the nightmares were back, but more annoyed by the tremors in his hands.

A week passed like this, insomnia and nightmares, circles growing deeper under his eyes.

Charlie didn't ask him about dinner. The Monday after, she'd bounced into his classroom, eyes sparkling and questions on the tip of her tongue, but one look at him had her closing her mouth, and quietly backing out of the door.

His students were the best behaved they'd ever been, other teachers seem to be cutting him a wide berth, and it freaked him out to realize how transparent he must be, that everyone around him could see how fucked up he was.

Now, two Saturdays before his wedding, he and Sam were at the tuxedo shop in Towson Town Center, getting their final fittings done. Victor was supposed to join them, the other part of Dean's wedding party, but some FBI emergency had him out of town for the weekend.

Dean was operating on autopilot. He'd managed to not run into Castiel at all in the last week. He wasn't sure if he was happy or unhappy about that fact, and the uncertainty bugged the hell out of him, spiraling him into an unending cycle of anger and doubt. He was unbalanced, distracted, and frustrated.

Life had been so simple two weeks before. He was getting married, he was happy, everything was going great. Now, fucking Cas with his fucking blue eyes had bulldozed his way back into his life and it was absolutely the last fucking thing he needed.

He and Sam were sitting in the food court, Dean distractedly poking at a mediocre burger, pushing fries around his plate, not really paying attention to Sam, who was going on and on about some new old book he’d been given to do his magic old book thing with, and what an honor it was to be trusted with such an ancient tome. Dean hadn't meant to tune Sam out, he really hadn't, and he knew how much Sam hated it when he did that.

"Have you listened to a damn thing I've said?" Sam finally asked irritably.

"Yeah, you got a new old book. Awesome."

Sam's sigh told him he'd gotten it wrong, as his brother shoved his empty salad plate to the side.
"That is not what I said. I said I went to see Dad."

"Swell. How’d that go?"

"It was fine. It usually is. He wanted to know how you were."

"What did you tell him?"

"That you’re good. He'd like you to come and visit though."

Dean shook his head. "Not going to happen."

"Well, maybe…"

"No."

"Ok, jeez. Sorry."

Appetite totally gone, Dean pushed his tray away. "So now what?"

"Huh?"

"Do we head back to my place or what? We're done with the whole tux thing."

"Christmas shopping? I still need to pick up something for Ellen."

"Oh. Yeah. I haven't gotten anything for anyone other than you, Anna, and Vic. I need to get something for Charlie. And apparently, I still need to get groomsmen's gifts. Weddings, dude."

Sam grinned, "Get me something nice, bro." He took a sip of his soda. "So are you coming to Ellen's Christmas Eve?"

"Hadn't planned on it."

"Why not?"

Dean sighed, scrubbing his face with his hand. "Sam, that life is over for me. You know that. I call every couple of months. That's enough. Right?"

"I dunno, man, we owe Ellen and Bobby."

"Look, I'm - I'm going home. I don't want to do this with you."

Sam looked confused, "do what with me? I don't understand."

"I don't get why you think it's so fucking important for me to go crawling back to fucking Remington."

"Yeah, well I don't get why you're getting so upset. We're just talking. I mean jeez, Dean, if you were ready to let it go, you'd put the firehouse on the market already."

"Ok, seriously, I'm done. Done." Dean stood, chair shooting out behind him, and stalked away from Sam.

There was a clatter behind him, and he knew Sam was going to chase him down. There was no escaping a Sasquatch on a mission, after all.
Sure enough, Sam caught up with him a moment later. "What is your deal?" he huffed angrily. "Don't be all short tempered with me and then run off without an explanation. What the hell is going on with you? Does this have something to do with dinner the other night?"

"No," Dean growled, striding down the mall corridor.

"Bullshit," Sam hissed. "You seem to have me mistaken for some other brother who doesn't know you inside and out. What the hell is going on with you?"

Dean sighed, turning back to face Sam. "Look, I finally got my life squared away. You know how hard that was for me. Now, Cas is back, fucking with my head, and you want me to go down Ellen and Bobby's and crawl right back into my old life and I can't, Sam, I can't."

A sad look crossed Sam's face. "Dude, it's not like that. I swear. Just, they miss you. They both think of us as sons, and it hurts both of them that you never want to see them."

"Don't you get it though? Everything down there sends me right back to the past, and I'm trying to make something out of what's left of my life! I'm putting all that shit behind me. I don't want to go back, I don't want to visit fucking Dad, and I sure as hell don't want to see -"

Oh fuck. No. No no no.

Cas was walking out of a store, several bags in hand, trailed by his older brother Gabriel, who was tapping away on a cell phone. Blue eyes met his, widening in surprise. Dean felt the blood drain from his face.

"What? What's wrong, you look like you're gonna hurl." Sam followed his eyes, "Oh fuck. Cas."

"He's fuckin' stalking me," Dean whispered.

He spun on his heel, and darted down the corridor. He heard Sam call for him, but ignored him. They each brought their own cars, and Dean was gone. No fucking way was he staying there. Nope. Gone. He didn't really take a breath until he was in the parking garage, safely tucked into the Impala. His phone buzzed.

-So I guess I'll see you later?

-Yeah. Sorry. Had to get out of there.

-Ok. I'll call you later.

-Ok.

Dean started the car, the classic rock station already tuned into his stereo, and In My Life was playing. He huffed and stabbed the power button with his finger.

It was like the whole damn world was determined to make him relive his past.

"So it didn't go so well, huh? Was the fiancée a bitch?"

"No, she was wonderful. Gracious, funny, charming. Anna's a very nice woman."

"Never mind that she's standing between you and Dean."

Cas sighed, turning the rack of ties, trying to find one suitable for Michael. "Dean doesn't want
anything to do with me, Gabe. He made that very clear. Anna's wonderful. I hope they'll be very happy." Cas took a red tie off the rack. "This will work for Michael, right? I don't know what to get him."

"Ties always work. And you're changing the subject. I don't want to hear about Anna, tell me about Dean."

"I don't know what you want from me, Gabe, I'm not going to be a home wrecker." Cas led the way to the cash register. He paid for the tie, smiling his thanks at the clerk as she carefully packed it in a gift box. He took the bag, and gathered the rest of his packages. "I need coffee. My treat?"

"Sure," Gabe said easily, following him out of the store, tapping away on his phone.

The Saturday afternoon mall crowd was smiling and laughing, arms full of packages as they made their rounds of the shops and stalls. Cas cut through the crowd, heading for Starbucks, when he saw a familiar figure standing just a few yards away. Green eyes met his, a horrified expression on Dean's face. He turned and darted down the corridor, away from him and the tall man calling after him.

Sam's shoulders slumped in frustration and he turned around to face the Novak brothers.

"Whoa, did he get tall!" Gabe said gleefully, "and pretty."

"No, Gabe, no. Just no."

Sam starting walking towards them, a storm brewing on his face, and Cas watched in fascination as he visibly pushed his anger down, features smoothing out and calming before they met in front of the food court.

"Cas. Good to see you, man," Sam smiled and offered his hand. Cas took it and smiled back at Sam. Sam then held his hand out to Gabe, who took it with a far too pleased expression on his face. "How's it going, Gabe?"

"Just fine, Sammy, just fine."

Sam squinted at Gabe before turning his attention back to Cas. "So, uh, Dean thinks you're stalking him."

Cas sighed. "I'm not. I had no idea he'd be here today."

"I know."

"You got tall, kid. And gorgeous."

Sam blushed, his cheeks flaming at Gabe's words. "Uh," he rubbed the back of his neck, "thanks?"

"Gabe, why don't you head on home? I'll see you later."

"Sure, I know when I'm not wanted," he said pleasantly. "Good to see you again, Sammy." Gabe waved and winked as he left them.

"I'm sorry."

"No, it's ok, he was always flirting with me. Kind of used to it."

"It really is good to see you, Sam. Can I buy you a cup of coffee? That's where Gabe and I were headed anyway."
"Sure."

A short time later, they were sitting across from each other at a café table, nursing hot beverages.

"So how have you been, Sam? Dean says you're working for the Smithsonian."

"Yup. I got accepted to the Dibner Library Fellowship. They basically pay me to read and translate old books and texts. It's pretty much my dream job. And you, a published writer. Good job, man." Sam's words were easy, comfortable, but there was something hiding in his eyes.

"How is he? Really?"

Sam sighed and ran a hand through his hair, a familiar gesture that made Castiel long for simpler times. "He's - he's better. He's getting there."

"Ellen said he was pretty messed up after I left."

"Yeah. That's understating it a bit."

"Will you tell me? Please?"

"Not my story to tell, Cas." Sam stirred his coffee, and stared out into the mall, a faraway look on his face. "He's not the guy he was when you left. And part of me wants to be furious with you and sit here and recount all the ways you fucked him up, but truth is, he didn't make it easy for you, did he? I think you both fucked things up. I dunno."

"Sam, that last week…it was unbearable. I didn't know what else to do."

"You think I don't know that? I was there, I saw it go down live and in color. Believe me. I know."

"What happened with your father? Ellen mentioned something."

"He's in jail," Sam said flatly.

"For what?"

Sam leaned forward, a very dark and dangerous expression glinting in his eyes. "I'm not sure if I should tell you that. I don't know that Dean would appreciate me telling you all of this stuff. It's not really your business anymore, is it?"

"No," Cas said quietly. "I guess it's not." He shifted uncomfortably on the hard plastic chair.

"You're still in love with him." Sam stated it as fact, not a question.

"Not that it matters. Sam, what happened to him?"

The other man stared into his coffee cup for a long time, not saying anything. Finally, he lifted his head, "I'll tell you everything. I don't know why, but I will. But I swear to god, Cas, you fuck him over again, you mess up what he's spent the last few years trying to build, fuck, you hurt him in any way, and I swear I'll..." he trailed off.

"Sam, I don't want to mess his life up. If he's happy, then he's happy. I'm not going to ruin his life. I just want to know what happened."

He seemed to think Cas's words over for a moment, fingers absently carding through his own hair. "Ok." Sam said finally. "But we're going to find somewhere with alcohol, 'cause I'm going to need
November 2000

Dean stared out into the crowd at Benny's, grinning as he played a few more notes on his Stratocaster, the glittery white finish reflecting the stage's lights. He rarely played at Benny's, preferring the smaller evening crowd at Ellen's, but the band lined up for this particular Friday night had bailed, and Benny had begged, so Dean had spent the last two hours accompanying himself through a set of his favorite classic rock tunes, and had just finished *Carry On Wayward Son*.

A pretty girl with long blonde hair and a tight red minidress was grinning at him from the table closest to the stage. Her tongue darted out, provocatively licking her bottom lip, all the while keeping her eyes on him. Dean smiled back at her, winking. She pulled the stir stick from her drink, licking it slowly.

His dick gave an interested twitch in his jeans, and he finished the song, thanked the appreciative crowd, set his guitar down, and made his way off the stage and over to the bar. Benny slid him a whiskey.

"Thanks brotha, 'preciate the help."

"No problem," Dean said distractedly, searching the crowd for the girl.

"So where's Cas?" Benny asked pointedly.

"Uh, I dunno? Home I guess?"

"Huh."

The girl was walking his way, hips swinging as she crossed the room to him. She sat on the stool next to him.

"Hi," she smiled, running a hand up his arm. "I'm Lilith. You're very talented," she added.

"Dean," he said, "and thanks."

"Buy me a drink, Dean?"

"Sure," he said easily, "Benny, get the lady what she wants."

Lilith smiled, perfect white teeth glinting in the dimness of the bar. She moved closer, her knee brushing his thigh. "So imagine meeting such a talented guy in a dive like this."

Benny slammed her gin and tonic onto the bar, grumbling as he walked away. "I wouldn't call it a dive," Dean told her, amused at Benny's reaction.

"Well, if I didn't call it a dive, how else could I segue into asking you if you want to get out of here?"

"Damn, you move fast, lady."

She moved even closer, pale hand moving up to smooth over the collar of his shirt. "Oh you have no idea, baby." She shrieked a second later, half jumping out of her stool.
"Oops!" Jo chortled, holding an empty glass in her hand. "My bad," she said innocently, all fake wide eyes.

Lilith glared at her, then turned back to Dean. "Excuse me a moment," she said with a terse smile, "I need to go to the ladies."

Dean watched her go, and then turned back to Jo. "What the hell?"

"Come with me. Now." She grabbed him by the arm, dragging him out of Benny's and into the street. She pushed open the door to the Roadhouse, shoving him through. "Sit down."

"What the hell, woman?! I'm going back to Benny's!"

"No, you're not! Sit down! We need to talk." She flipped the Open sign to Closed, and pointed to a booth. "Sit. I'll get you some pie, ok? Just sit."

"Fine," he said huffily, dropping into the booth. She was back a moment later with coffee and pie, and slid into the booth opposite him.

"What the fuck are you doing, Dean?"

"Eating pie, apparently."

"No, the girl, asshole! What was up with that? I thought you and Cas were...y'know."

"No. I mean. I don't know. Since Sammy moved in. I dunno."

Jo sighed and stabbed at her pie. "You're an idiot, you know that?"

"So I've heard," he replied drily.

"You know why I was pissed at you a few weeks ago?"

"No."

"Because you plowed through all my friends. You slept with every girl I knew, but you didn't have time for me. And it hurt. You flirt with me nonstop, but you were never interested in me. At all."

Dean squirmed. "Cause you're like my little sister or something. That would just be weird, Jo."

"Fine. And I get that. But now there's Cas. And something was happening there, I'm sure of it. You guys spend all your time together, you seem to have forgotten any and all idea of personal space, and Jesus, Dean, have you seen the way the guy looks at you? Clearly, you didn't see him tonight!"

"He was there?"

"Yeah, he was there. Sat in the back through your entire set, then I was treated to watching his face fall when you starting flirting with the little blonde bitch!"

"Oh," Dean said quietly, staring down at his pie. "I didn't realize he was there."

"He likes you. And I think you like him."

"I'm not gay..." he countered weakly.

"So fucking what? Who cares?"
"People care…"

"What people? Your worthless dad? The one that beat you on a regular basis? Why the fuck would you even give half a shit about what he thinks?"

"Jo…"

"Dude, seriously, if it's not that, then what's the problem?"

"I dunno, I'm just…I'm scared, I guess? I don't know. Look, I like Cas, I like him a lot, but I don't want…I don't want…” he struggled to find the right words.

"You don't want a one night stand. You're actually thinking about a relationship this time, aren't you?” she murmured. "Holy cow, Dean. You really like him."

"Yeah." He absently scratched the back of his neck. "And thing is, Jo, we were so close the other morning, when Sam showed up. I dunno, something was about to happen, and truth is, Cas is amazing. He deserves so much better than me."

"Maybe you should let him decide what he deserves. And you know what? You're pretty amazing yourself. You should go home. Go home and talk to him. But flirting with random skanks? That shit needs to stop. Go home, Dean."

He nodded, and pulled himself to his feet. "What the hell do I even say to him, Jo?"

"Start with a thank you for getting Michael to help with Sam's emancipation. See what happens from there. Apologizing for the girl might not hurt, either. Bake him a pie, play him a song. Do I really need to spell this out for you?"

"Jo, all I've ever had is – I mean there was Cassie, but other than that,” Dean picked at a string on his jacket. "You think I have the first clue what I'm doing here?"

"Tell him that, then. Be honest. Tell him you want more, and that you don't know what you're doing." She gently pushed him to the door. "Go home. Nut up, Winchester. Be a man."

Dean sighed and let her push him out the door, and she locked it behind him. He walked down the street, stopping in front of the firehouse.

Fuck, he was nervous.

Cas shoved another book onto the bookshelves in his room, trying very hard to control his temper. Seven days ago, he and Dean had been on the cusp of something new, something amazing, then Sam Winchester had knocked on their door.

And not for one moment did he resent Sam, who was also quickly becoming one of the best friends he'd ever had, but something about his arrival had shut Dean down. He was closed off and distant, and then tonight, tonight -

Cas growled at the thought of that woman, with her hands all over him, but worse than that, Dean had been flirting back. When he left Benny's, they were all but entwined, the blonde pushing herself closer into Dean's space with every move.

Dean was scared. He was scared of what could happen between them. Cas knew it, Sam knew it, everyone but Dean knew it.
Sam had looked at him with sad eyes when he'd stormed back into the firehouse. "I'm sorry," was all he had said, once again displaying his odd penchant for being more astute than his age gave him credit for. Not to mention, he knew Dean. Better than anyone.

Cas hadn't responded, just went in his room and closed the door, and he started cleaning. Every book back on the shelves, his desk tidied and schoolwork tucked away, dirty clothes in the hamper, sheets stripped and the bed remade.

He was running out of steam, weariness and disappointment weighing him down. Cas sank onto his freshly made bed, and stared out the window. The door opened and he didn't look up. "What's up, Sam?"

"Not Sam," Dean said quietly. "Hey, Cas."

"Hello, Dean," Cas sighed. "What do you need?"

"I um, I need to talk to you. If you've got a minute." He sounded incredibly nervous, and Cas raised his head. Dean stood in the doorway, one hand on his hip, the other rubbing his neck. He was fidgeting and there was a slight blush on his cheeks.

"What did you want?"

"I wanted to thank you. Y'know, for bringing Michael over to help Sam and me. That was pretty great."

Cas nodded but didn't say anything.


"Fuck. The girl, Cas. I'm sorry about that."

"Why?"

"Because I…" He sighed, eyes darting, looking everywhere but at Cas. "You're gonna make me spell it all out, aren't you?" Dean took a deep breath, his cheeks growing even redder. "Look, I don't know what the hell I'm doing here. I'm so fucking confused, Cas, and I've never even had a real relationship, not to mention you're a dude, and I really like you, but the whole damn thing is so fucking confusing, and I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. I don't."

Oh.

"You're scared." Cas stood, walking across his bedroom floor. "You're scared," he said again, "because this is all new for you. None of this fits into your carefully constructed boxes. So you went out and found familiar ground. To distract yourself." Dean backed up against the wall as Cas walked closer, and he reached out and shut his bedroom door. "You're afraid, because I make you feel things. It's different. You don't know how to act because you've never been here before. You've never wanted more than one night. And now you do, and you're scared. And it's worse, because I'm nothing you've had before. Am I right?"

Dean flattened himself against the wall, as Cas moved ever closer, inches from him now, and his eyes were simultaneously turned on and terrified. "I don't know what I'm doing," he whispered helplessly.
"Mmm. But I do. And I can show you."

Cas reached out a hand, hooked it around Dean's neck and pulled him down, pressing their lips together. Dean's lips were soft, and tasted of pie and whiskey. He didn't respond at first, but then he seemed to melt into Cas, hands coming up and resting on his hips and then he was kissing back.

God, he was kissing back, and Cas was losing himself. He pushed Dean hard into the wall, shoving his thigh between Dean's legs and swallowing the gasp that escaped, slipping his tongue inside Dean's mouth.

When they finally surfaced, Dean's pupils were gone, blown wide, just a thin band of green around the outside, and he was flushed and breathing hard.

"Wow," he whispered, eyes wide.

Castiel grinned.

"You ain't seen nothing yet."
They moved from the door to the bed, Dean bouncing against the mattress as Cas shoved him down, following him and blanketing his body with his own. Castiel slid a hand under his shirt, his fingertips cool and insistent, pushing the fabric up Dean's chest, while his lips found his neck, nipping and kissing.

"Cas…"

"Am I moving too fast?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I want."

"Why don't you just let me show you?" He nuzzled into Dean's neck again. "We don't have to do anything, you know? We could just kiss. Just lay here and talk. There's no rush, Dean."

Dean turned his head towards Cas, meeting him halfway, lips pressing together, softness and pressure. Cas slid a hand around Dean's neck, pulling him impossibly closer, licking at the seam of his mouth, and Dean opened up and let him in, the taste of Cas intoxicating.

When they broke apart, Dean's chest was heaving. "Wow. I could…I could do that all night."

"Feels better with skin to skin contact. Wanna try?"

Dean gulped. "Sure."

Cas grinned and slid his hands up Dean's chest, pushing his shirt up. Dean sat up and let Cas pull the tee over his head. He pushed Dean back into the pillows, clambering up and straddling his hips, sitting just below Dean's crotch.

He trailed his fingers down Dean's chest, lightly tracing the lines of his tattoos. "These are all so beautiful," he murmured. "I've been wanting to touch them since the day we met." He brushed his fingers over Dean's right shoulder. "It's time to ramble on…Zeppelin?"

"Yeah. And the roses and the dagger…because it was my first and I'm a walking cliché."

"No, cliché is the Winchester Arms logo and lettering down the side here, Mr. Winchester. Tattooing one's name on oneself is seriously cliché," Cas grinned as he drew his fingers down Dean's flank. The contact made him shiver slightly. "What's this one?" His fingers slid across Dean's belly.

"Uh, that's a Colt Revolver. My dad had one when I was a kid."

"What's the wording mean?"

"Non timebo mala…I will fear no evil."

"Nice. And this one?" His hand slid up Dean's right arm.

"The Hermit. It's a tarot figure, but I got it because it's in the center fold of the Zep IV album."

Cas hummed. He walked his fingers up Dean's arm and across his collarbone. "This one?" he asked, fingers tracing a circle around the tattoo on Dean's left pectoral. "It looks occult-ish."
"Found it in a book. It's an anti-possession sigil. Keeps the demons out." He held up his left forearm, the skin there covered with orange, yellow, and red flames. "This one's for Sammy. Because I carried him out the night our house burned. The initials are done to look like the ones he carved into the wood under the carpet in the Impala, and the date is his birthday."

"I like it. You said Pam did all your work?"

"Yeah, she's really good."

"Will you roll over, so I can see the wings?"

"Sure."

Cas raised his body off of Dean's hips, allowing him to roll onto his stomach. He felt Cas's lips drag along his wings, as he kissed each individual feather. "Beautiful," he breathed, following the trail of feathers down to the waistline of Dean's jeans. "I like the one down here too," he said, fingers tracing the outlines of the tattoo at the base of Dean's back. "Peace when you are done, and roses. The blade is unusual."

"It's my artist's rendering of what an angel's sword might look like. I think most people would assume an angel would carry something large, like a claymore or a broadsword, but I think an angel would carry something sleek and deadly, something they could easily conceal..." he trailed off, once again embarrassed by his passion for all things angel.

"I love that. Amazing." Cas pressed kisses along the base of Dean's spine, sliding back up Dean's back, kissing the whole way up, and by the time he pressed a series of kisses to the base of Dean's neck, he was gone. He was sweating and turned on, and filled with want.

"Cas..."

"Shh, just let me, Dean. Let me." Cas slid his hands under Dean's body, his fingers finding the fly of his jeans. Dean lifted his hips slightly to make for easier access, and Cas undid his jeans, then sat back, sliding the denim down his hips. He scooted down the bed, disposing of the pants. He pulled his socks off and tossed them to the side.

"Is this really an Impala logo on your ankle?"

Dean blushed. "Yeah."

Cas lifted his other leg, fingers brushing over his calf and the tattoo there. "No damn cat, and no damn cradle. You're a Vonnegut fan? I'm impressed."

Dean felt lips against his ankle, hands smoothing across the skin on his legs. Cas was kissing his way back up Dean's body, taking his sweet time, kissing and nipping every available inch of Dean's skin.

"Cas, you're killin' me here."

"Mmm," Cas hummed. "I haven't really even done anything yet." He hooked his fingers in Dean's boxers. Dean held his breath. "You ok with this?"

"Yeah. Go for it."

Cas pulled them down, and that was it. He was naked. He was one hundred percent naked, on his stomach on Cas's bed. His cock was hard and dripping against the softness of the comforter. Dean was more turned on that he'd ever been in his life, and he couldn't help but thrust his hips into the
"There's a shamrock on your ass, Dean."

"Yeah. Um. I'm not Irish. Least not as far as I know. St. Patrick's last year. Blame Benny."

"Let's not talk about Benny."
Fingers brushed his crack, and he inadvertently pushed his hips into the mattress again, this time with a breathy Cas. "Look at you. All turned on, aren't you," Cas whispered in his ear. At some point, the other man had lost his clothes, and he was pressed against Dean's back in a long line of heat, hardness jutting into his hip as Cas's breath fell hot on his neck and ear. His hand slid slowly up Dean's back, fingers carding through his hair. "Roll over, baby," Cas purred. 

Dean complied, staring up into Cas's blue eyes. The room was still fully lit, both the lamps on Cas's nightstands turned on, and when he looked up, Cas smiled at him, his eyes almost black with lust. 

"So beautiful," Cas murmured, dipping his head to kiss him. His lips were insistent, his tongue forcing its way in again, and Dean's body finally remembered how to work, arms coming up to pull Cas closer, one leg hooking over his. He moaned into Cas's mouth when their erections made contact, a full body shiver brought on by the instant rush of arousal.

Holy shit, it had never felt this good before, and they'd barely done anything.

Cas grinned. "Stop me if I do something you don't like, ok?"

Dean nodded. 

Still grinning, Cas kissed him again, sliding down his neck. He stopped to suck Dean's nipple into his mouth, then continued his descent, trailing kisses all the way down his chest, and he was almost there before Dean realized what he was doing.

"Oh god," he whined, as Cas's mouth found him, heat everywhere. He closed his mouth around Dean's length, licking the tip, sucking him down to the base. Cas twisted his tongue through Dean's slit, then dropped his head again, taking in as much of him as he could. Dean's back arched off the bed, and Cas reached up and draped his free arm over Dean's hips, pinning him to the bed.

Cas's other hand refused to stay in one place, and as he was busy sucking Dean's brains out through his dick, his fingers slipped downward, finding Dean's balls.

"Ahh, Jesus," Dean hissed, as Cas rolled his balls through his nimble fingers, his mouth insistent, bobbing up and down on his cock, and he was so close already, it wouldn't take much, desire and heat pooling in his belly, and god he was just so damn close.

Cas looked up, stared at him through those goddamn beautiful blue eyes, and that was it. That was all it took.

Dean's whole body locked up, his hips helplessly jerking upward, and Cas sucked him all the way down, humming around him as he came.

He was dazed, and he watched, slightly detached, as Cas climbed back on top of him, straddling his hips again, and all Dean could do was lie there, mesmerized, as Cas's hand slid up and down his own shaft, hips moving back and forth in his lap, and then the other man was coming all over him, thick ropes of come splattering across his chest, his tattoos covered in Cas's come.

"Holy fuck," Dean whispered. "Holy fuck."
Cas grinned down at him, beautifully flushed, a self-satisfied expression on his gorgeous face. "Enjoyed it?"

"Yeah, just was - so damn fast."

"Not like we can't do it again, right?"

Dean nodded helplessly, and Cas just laughed at him, leaning down for a kiss.

"This is only the beginning, Winchester. Only the beginning."

Sun streamed through the window, warm on his face. There was an even warmer source of heat at his back, and an arm thrown lazily over his waist. Cas shifted, rolled over on his side. Dean's face was half buried in the pillow, a peaceful expression on the bit he could see.

He could hear Sam rattling around the kitchen, the smell of coffee in the air, but he had zero desire to get up. No, if he had his way, he'd stay here all day, wrapped around the beautiful man currently asleep in his bed.

Last night had taken him by surprise. He'd never expected, when he stormed out of Benny's, the blonde girl practically in Dean's lap, that he'd end up with Dean in his bed, warm and naked, pressed tight against him.

Cas trailed fingers down the side of his face, smiling when Dean's face scrunched up, brow furrowing slightly. He made a soft noise, and burrowed closer into Cas, unconsciously seeking the warmth of another body in the early morning chill of the firehouse.

There was a soft tap on the door, and Cas checked first to make sure they were both fully covered before quietly calling out, "come in."

Sam poked his head through the door, a big grin on his face. "So things worked out?" he asked quietly, eyes taking in his peacefully sleeping brother.

"Indeed," Cas smiled.

"Cool. Anyway, I just wanted to let you guys know I was leaving. Ellen's taking me out to the mall to get some stuff for school. I'm pretty sure she's adopting me."

"She does that. Have a good time. I'll let Dean know."

"Ok." He started to pull the door shut, then stuck his head back in. "I'm happy for you guys," he said.

"Me too. Go, Sam, have fun. We'll see you later."

Sam nodded, waved, and pulled the door shut.

Sometime later, Cas woke again, not even aware of having fallen back asleep. He could hear soft piano music in the other room, and he was disappointed to find the bed empty. Throwing back the covers, he hurriedly dressed in sweats, yanked the comforter off the bed, and padded out to the living room.

He plopped down on the piano bench next to Dean, wrapping the comforter around both of them. Dean stopped playing, turning towards Cas with a smile, and a kiss.
"Morning, angel."

"Good morning, Dean."

Castiel smiled at him, scooting closer on the bench. Dean abandoned the piano keys, instead burying his cold hands in Cas's sweatshirt. "Mmm, you're warm."

"This firehouse is a refrigerator."

"Doesn't matter. I can keep you cozy." Dean swung one leg over the bench, straddling it, and he pulled Cas into his lap. He cupped his chin in his palm, pulling him into a deep kiss, his other arm wrapped around his waist. "I can keep us both warm."

"I am onboard with this plan, but I'd like to take you back to bed."

"I'm fine with that."

The clothes Castiel had put on disappeared as they stumbled back into his bedroom, lips never separating as they did their best to stay upright, Dean kicking the door shut behind them, and they tumbled into the bed.

"So, keeping us warm? Any ideas?"

Dean grinned, his green eyes bright and sparkling.

"Oh, I might have a few."

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**Now**

Somehow, it made sense that Dean would end up at the firehouse following his flight from the mall. After all of his protests about not wanting to be anywhere near Remington, it seemed sadly predictable that he'd ended up there. Dean pulled the big double doors closed behind the Impala and leaned against them, the solidity reassuring as he willed his heart to stop slamming against his sternum. He stood against the doors for a long time, listening to the Impala tick as she cooled.

It was cold in the firehouse, and the air smelled stale. As his sight adjusted to the dimness of the engine bay, he swept his eyes over the canvas covered lumps scattered around the floor. The scaffold stood in the same place, dust covering the planks. The brass fire pole had lost much of its shine from years of not being used. Dust clung to every flat surface and cobwebs dangled from the exposed beams and light fixtures.

A large canvas stood in place behind the scaffold, a white sheet of fabric covering it in its entirety, and he was relieved that he couldn't see it, couldn't see the subject matter. All the old crates and bins full of found objects were right where he'd left them.

Nothing had really changed. And how could it, when he refused to clean the place out, refused to put it up for sale, refused to let go of this one last piece of his past?

Dean sighed and pulled his back from the doors. He wandered through the engine bay, fingers sweeping through the dust and leaving little trails behind, touching and feeling, picking things up and setting them aside.

There was a faded, rust colored splotch on the concrete floor near a crate of old hood ornaments, and he shuddered when he realized it was blood. *His* blood. Dean shoved down the memory that went
with it, moving to another section of the bay.

He found himself under the scaffold, his fingers toying with the edge of the fabric covering the large canvas. It wouldn't take much to pull it down and look at it. He just didn't want to. His workbench was dusty, a few boxes piled on top. His turntable and LP collection were in those boxes. Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, Hendrix, The Doors, Derek and the Dominos, The Beatles - albums that had been his mother's pride and joy, which he had quietly stolen from his dad when he left home. It had been years since he'd listened to one.

Sighing, Dean moved away from the scaffold, slowly wandering towards the stairwell. His eyes caught a dull shine of red paint. Cas's Schwinn. He'd left it behind when he left.

Dean stared at it for a moment, then turned on his heel, ducking into the stairwell.

The upstairs resembled a room full of ghosts, every piece of furniture covered in white drop cloths. He wandered into Sam's old room first, the bed and dresser covered with more of the same white fabric. A book lay in the center of the bed, Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The cover was partially obscured by a thin film of dust.

His room was much the same, drop cloths and boxes full of crap that had no place in Anna's perfect little house. Dean opened the closet door. He ran his fingers over the old leather jacket hanging there, the one he couldn't get rid of but could barely stand to look at anymore. The smell of leather was overwhelming. He shut the door, and walked away from the closet. Running his fingers across the rows of art history texts and novels, he stared idly at the dusty trails his fingers left.

He slowly wandered back into the common area of the firehouse, shivering a bit in the coolness. Dean only ran the heat at about fifty degrees over the winter, just warm enough to keep the pipes from freezing when it got cold.

The sun had slipped behind a cloud, and it was dim in the firehouse, deep shadows joining the white drop cloths in making the place feel rather eerie.

There was one more door. One more bedroom. As if in a daze, Dean slowly pushed it open.

Nothing had changed, and for good reason. He'd closed this door when he realized Cas wasn't coming back and it hadn't been opened since. The air was stale, thicker layers of dust on the surfaces in there.

The bookshelves were still mostly filled. There were clothes in the closet. The bed was still partially made, one corner of the comforter pulled down as if expecting an occupant at any time. Books were stacked on every surface, and a crusty glass sat on the nightstand, a notebook and pen stationed next to it.

A ratty tan trenchcoat lay across the bed, a silent accusation of failure.

Dean sucked his bottom lip between his teeth. He stood in the doorway for a long time, staring at the trenchcoat, his eyes burning.

His failure. All his.

Cas left, but Dean made him leave. His behavior made him leave. And he could try and try to convince himself that it wasn't his fault, and that the fault lay with Cas, but Dean knew the truth. He drove Cas out, he made him leave, his actions sent him away.

He couldn't look at Cas's room anymore. Dean pulled the door shut, walking backwards through the
firehouse, absently crashing his back into something solid. He turned, and ran a hand over the sheet covered mass of baby grand. The firehouse was completely dark now, just an orangey glow from a streetlight providing the only illumination.

His hand slid across the top of the piano, gathering drop cloth into his palm. With a sharp yank and an ungodly cloud of dust, Dean uncovered the piano, the black wood still shiny and inviting. He plopped onto the bench with sigh, running his hand across the lid.

It had been years. But he slid the lid open anyway, flexing his fingers and stretching his hands. The first touch of fingertips to ivory revealed that there were a few keys out of tune, but nothing jarring. He ran a couple of scales, up and down the black and white keys, muscle memory taking over, music tinkling through the empty firehouse.

Dean started picking out notes, disjointed sounds forming into melodies, and from there into song, and he let himself get swept away in the music, Led Zeppelin, Mozart, Richard Marx, Chopin, Metallica, Coldplay, Pearl Jam, John Williams, it swept him away and he let it take him.

Hey Jude escaped, and then Wonderwall, and he didn't know when he'd started crying, just that he was. His face was wet; there were splotches on his denim coat, even wet spots on the keys and his fingers.

He was crying and he couldn't stop, and he didn't stop playing, just swept into another song. In My Life falling from the piano.

Something broke in him. Something shattered. A wall, one he'd carefully built, each brick hand laid, shored up with the best mortar, and sealed with his own pain and blood.

Dean couldn't see the piano anymore, but the notes kept coming, kept rolling from the strings and hammers and he was unable to stop the flow. He was sobbing now, and it hurt. It hurt so fucking bad.

Arms wrapped around him, warm arms, pulling him away from the piano and onto the sheet covered couch, rocking him gently while he sobbed, soft lips pressed against his forehead, Ellen's soft words whispered in his ear.

He cried and cried, losing himself like he hadn't in years, Ellen holding him tight while he fell apart.

And through all of his pain, all of his grief, Dean finally acknowledged what he'd been trying to fight from the moment he saw Castiel in the bookstore.

He was still completely, painfully, unequivocally in love with Cas.
They found a small bistro near the mall on York Road. The music was cheerful and the place was full of Towson University students, laughing over Christmas presents and discussing plans for the holidays. Sam folded his long legs into a chair and leaned back, running a hand through his hair.

Sam looked good. He had grown out of that childish, overgrown puppy look, and into adulthood. There were even a few crinkles in the corners of his eyes. He fidgeted slightly on his chair, smiling up at the waitress when she brought them water, his discomfort and nervousness painfully evident. Whatever it was he planned on telling Cas, it wasn't going to be pretty, and a tight ball of dread settled in his gut.

He ordered a steak and baked potato with a craft beer, and Sam ordered the same but with steamed broccoli instead of the potato, and a Jack and Coke. Dinner itself was pleasant. Sam was very good company, cheerful and upbeat despite his underlying nervousness, and they chatted about the old neighborhood and the people who'd lived there.

They talked about Cas's family, and how everyone was doing. Sam was very pleased to hear that Michael had made partner at his law firm, and expressed his gratitude for all the help he had given Sam and Dean when they were younger. Sam told him about Vic's wedding, how much nicer his new wife was, and how much of a better fit she was for him than Bela. He talked about how Benny, Ellen and Bobby were getting along. They glossed over anything specifically Dean-related, and Castiel was finding it difficult to eat. The fact that Sam downed three Jack and Cokes in short order was rather telling, and he was also picking at his steak, and not really eating.

Giving it up for a lost cause, Cas had his dinner packed in a to-go box and Sam followed suit. The other man was a quite a bit looser now, his hand gestures a little more grand, as he ordered a fourth drink, and Cas had to wonder if he was going to have to get Sam a hotel room for the night. Sam had never really drunk much, Cas remembered, despite the fact that there was never a shortage of alcohol in the firehouse. John Winchester had been an alarmingly heavy drinker, and it was one of the few things Sam got on Dean about. He didn't want to see his older brother become the messy alcoholic their father was.

So, watching Sam throw back drinks so casually definitely gave Cas cause to be concerned.

"He looked for you," Sam blurted out.

"What?"

"After you left. He looked for you. But your family didn't know where you'd gone and you left your cell at the firehouse."

"I needed to go, Sam. He slept with that girl, and I couldn't..." Cas sighed. "You couldn't expect me to stay. He stood there that morning and told me he didn't love me. What was I supposed to do with that? He cheated on me, Sam, and he broke my heart. He wanted to throw me out. So I gave him what he wanted, and I left."

"He panicked. You guys were getting serious. He was thinking long-term and decided there was no way in hell you would want him that long. So he had his big commitment panic and lashed out. He
knew that he'd fucked up. He spent the next three days trying to find you. We were talking private detectives and everything."

"What happened after three days to make him stop looking? I actually hadn't gotten that far. I was staying at a friend's in Cockeysville."

A very dark look crossed Sam's features. "Yeah." He scrubbed his face with one of his big hands, and signaled the waiter for a fifth drink.

"Don't you think you should stop? You've had an awful lot already."

Sam looked surprised. "Yeah, I guess I should. This is bad stuff, Cas. I don't want to relive it. Y'know? So let me have this one, and then I won't have any more, ok?"

"Ok."

"So um. Fuck. I shouldn't even be telling you this. It's not my...ah fuck it." Sam took a deep breath. "Three days after you left, I was over at the Roadhouse, helping Jo and Ellen move some stuff around. Dean was back at the firehouse. He was very determined. He knew he'd screwed up, and god, Cas, he missed you so much. He spent the first day drinking himself blind. The next day was September 11th, and that night, he decided that he had to find you. So the next day, he started calling everyone in your phone. We made an appointment with a P.I. He was determined to find you. I've never seen him so – dedicated."

He took another sip of his drink. "Ellen called me, asked me to come help out at the Roadhouse. About an hour after I left, Benny came in and said that there was a rusty old truck with West Virginia tags sitting in front of the firehouse. I knew it was my dad. I remembering running back up the street, and shoving the door open, just in time to see…"

Sam swallowed audibly, eyes filling with tears as he bit his bottom lip. "God, Cas. He hit him. My dad...they'd obviously been fighting, Dean had a bloody lip and nose, and my dad had taken some hits as well, but I stormed in there, just in time to see my dad pick up a 2x4," Sam swallowed again, shaking his head as he blinked the tears back, swiping at his face with his hand, "and I called out a warning, but I was too late. He hit Dean on the right side of his face. Hard." Sam's hand shook as he reached for his glass. "Just below the ear, slightly more to the back of the head," Sam moved his own hand on his face to show Castiel what he meant.

Cas said nothing, shocked into silence by Sam's story.

"And Dean, he just, he just crumpled, like his legs gave out and he couldn't hold himself upright anymore. I ran over to him. He was bleeding from his ear, and the back of his head, and he was so," Sam shuddered, "he was so fucking scared. He couldn't talk, couldn't move."

"My god…"

"Yeah. I don't remember a whole lot more. I know Benny came and sat on my dad until the cops got there." He downed the final dregs of his drink, tears still glistening in his eyes. "I've never been more afraid in my life, Cas."

"Then what happened?" Cas gently prompted.

"Sat at the hospital for hours. Nothing. No news. I think it was like eight hours before we heard a damn thing. He was in surgery. It was just one of those things. A perfect hit," he said bitterly, "Dad smacked him just the right way. He caused major damage. Dean kept crashing, and they had to open his head to stop the swelling and the bleeding, and it just…" Sam took another deep breath. "They
finally got him stabilized, and then he spent the next month slipping in and out of a coma. He was on full life support for most of that. Ventilator, feeding tube, the works. He kept picking up infections. They told me three separate times that he wasn't going to make it through the night. Three times, they told me to be prepared for him to die."

Cas could do little more than stare at Sam. The younger man was teetering on the verge of tears, his face open and so full of emotion that it hurt to look at him.

"Then, he just...he started responding. Started waking up. He couldn't talk, but he'd open his eyes and just stare at me. He spent the next eight months in a rehab facility, learning how to talk and walk and eat again. And through all of it, the docs kept telling me, he's never going to be the same, he'll need constant care, he'll never be fully independent again." Sam smiled, a real smile, and said, "but when I told Dean all that, he said fuck them. And two years after that, he went back to school to finish his teaching degree, got his own apartment, and started driving his baby again. He was determined to get back to normal. And he did. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

Sam grimaced. "He's never really been the same. He's quiet and reserved and he just kind of...I dunno. He's lost something. Maybe it was losing you, maybe it was the injury, maybe it was losing painting..."

"He said he stopped painting because I left. And Ellen said that he moved to the county not long after I left. I'm getting some very confusing information here," Cas said, with a raised eyebrow.

"Well, no offense, but I guess Ellen thought maybe it was none of your business. And no, he didn't stop painting. He can't paint. At least, not like he used to. He'll start a project, but it won't turn out how he envisioned, and he'll get all depressed and angry and just...stop. The docs said some of the creative centers of his brain were damaged, but that if he kept practicing, it would probably come back. He can still play the piano and the guitar. I don't know, Cas, maybe it's 50% can't and 50% won't. It's Dean. He's still as stubborn as ever. Hell, it's that stubbornness that helped him get better."

"Did you have anyone around to help you?"

"Yeah, Bobby and Ellen, and Jo, Benny, Pam, and Tessa." Sam smiled sadly, "Tessa's gone now. Cancer."

"Yes, Ellen told me."

"I'm glad you went to see her."

"Yeah, got an earful, as you might imagine."

"Oh yeah, I can imagine," Sam chuckled. "I-we-owe them so much. They took out a second mortgage on the restaurant and sold the condo in Ocean City to pay for Dean's medical bills. And Dean won't ever go see them. Pisses me off, but I know he has his reasons. He just wants to stay as far from Remington as possible."

"What happened with your dad?"

Sam let out another heavy sigh. "Well, Dean was in no shape to testify, so we were worried that Dad was going to get off. But Michael..."

"Michael? Michael knew? He's never said a word!"
"Uh, I don't know why, but, I mean, you pretty much dropped off the map, Cas."

"I didn't speak to my family for almost five years. I guess...I guess they don't owe me anything. Still, I would have thought, I mean, Michael and I were close..." Cas sighed. "I'm glad he was there to help you."

"He helped us file for Victim's Assistance, helped me deal with the prosecutor. Benny and I both were prepared to testify against him. Wasn't necessary though. Dad confessed to everything, and pleaded guilty to assault and a bunch of other crap. He's in Jessup. Will be for a long time. I go see him once a month or so. He's a sad old man and he hates himself, and he wants to see Dean so bad. He wants to apologize. Dean, as you can imagine, wants nothing to do with him."

A silence fell over the table. Sam picked at the table cloth, his fingernails worrying a loose thread. Cas sat quietly, processing everything Sam had told him, his heart aching for everything Dean had been through.

"Is he happy?" he finally asked. "You know him better than anyone. Is he happy, Sam?"

The other man didn't answer. He fiddled with his silverware, moved his napkin around, and wiped condensation off his glass. He checked his phone, frowning at a text message. Sam refused to meet Cas's eyes, and the silence at the table took on an edge of tension.

The waitress brought the bill, and Cas paid it while Sam responded to the text, frowning even more at the response.

"Is there any chance you can give me a ride? I'm too sloshed to drive."

"Of course. Where to?"

"Ellen's." Sam didn't elaborate.

"Ok."

They stood, collected their coats and take out boxes. Cas moved to leave the restaurant, but stopped when Sam rested his big hand on his shoulder. He turned, immediately taken aback by the ferocity in Sam's hazel eyes.

"No, Cas. He's not happy. Not like he was with you." He shrugged into his jacket, zipping it up. "And if you want to fix it, well, you got about two weeks to do something about it."

He left the bistro, stepping out onto the sidewalk, leaving Cas stunned and speechless behind him.

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November 2000

Dean blew a puff of air in Cas's ear.

"Stop it, you little shit."

He licked Cas's neck.

"I swear to God on high, so help me..."

Fingers tickling his ribs.

"Dean Winchester, if you want this goddamn pie done sometime this year, I suggest you mmfffl!"
Cas melted into Dean's embrace, his boyfriend's lips soft on his own. Dean's hands slipped under the hem of Cas's sweatshirt, fingers tracing patterns on his skin.

When they pulled apart again, Dean was grinning. "Hi."

"Hello, Dean. You said that ten minutes ago. Also? There's electric blue paint on your eyebrow."

"That's nothing new. Working on Raph's creepy smite-y eyes. When will the pie be ready?" He leaned in and nibbled on Cas's neck, attempting to sneak his hand around Cas to snatch pie dough.

"Ack! No. I need that dough, you idiot!"

Dean chuckled. "Aw, c'mon, just a little?"

"No!"

"Aw, man." Dean pretended to be insulted. "Guess I'll just have to wait until it's done," he said mournfully.

Castiel turned back to the counter, and finished rolling out the dough. Dean pressed his chest against Cas's back, strong arms wrapping around his waist. He pressed sweet little kisses along Cas's neck, humming some little tune under his breath.

"Because maybe, you're gonna be the one that saves me," he sang in his ear, "and after all, you're my wonderwall."

He couldn't help but smile, as Dean kept humming against his neck, little snatches of the song slipping out between soft kisses.

Two weeks.

The best two weeks of Castiel's life. Dean was attentive and sweet, and everything Cas had ever wanted in a relationship. They were disgustingly happy; something both Jo and Sam seemed to take perverse pleasure in pointing out.

For the most part, they slept in Cas's room, because Dean's mattress sucked, and the room between Cas's and Sam's provided something of a noise buffer. Not that it stopped Sam from complaining about hearing sounds leave his brother's mouth that he would have been happier spending his whole life not knowing about.

Sam had settled in. His perfect grades and Dean's promise to paint a new portrait of the school's patron saint, St. Francis of Assisi, had scored Sam a place in the senior class at Archbishop Curley, one of Baltimore's best private schools, tuition-free. He fit in with the prep school boys, with his dreams of Hopkins and ancient books. He was already making good friends, and he loved his teachers.

The emancipation process still hung over their heads; Dean far more worried about it then Sam. Sam was sure everything would work out. Dean was waiting for the other shoe to drop. But they went on with their lives, and life in the firehouse was fun and relaxing.

They were making plans for Thanksgiving, in just a week. Castiel had zero intention of going home to Hereford, and Sam and Dean definitely had no plans to visit John in West Virginia. Ellen and Bobby had invited them, plus Benny, to spend it in their apartment over the Roadhouse.

"I need pie now," Dean whined over his shoulder.
Cas slid on the top crust, and crimped the edges closed. "In forty-five minutes. You can wait that long." He cut a plus sign in the center of the crust to let the steam out, then slid the apple pie into the oven. Cas set the timer. "Forty-five minutes. You'll survive," he grinned.

Dean sighed dramatically, and headed for the piano. He flopped onto the bench and started tapping on the keys. "Stupid Oasis. Can't get this damn song out of my head." Wonderwall tinkled from the piano, Dean humming along with the notes, singing little snatches of the song. Cas flopped into the couch across from the piano, content to watch Dean play, even though he knew he should be studying for midterms.

"I like that song."

"Yeah? Huh." Dean played it a bit longer, his eyes sweeping over Cas as his fingers danced along the keys. "I'm not singing this to you," he said petulantly.

"Sure," Cas said easily.

Dean huffed. "And all the roads we have to walk are winding. And all the lights that lead us there are blinding. There are many things that I would like to say to you, but I don't know how." Dean stopped playing, and moved from the bench to the couch, dropping onto it near Cas's feet, crawling up his body, singing the whole time, "Because maybe, you're gonna be the one to save me," he leaned in and kissed Cas, "and after all, you're my wonderwall."

Cas pulled him in, sliding his hands up Dean's chest, pulling his shirt up and off. Soft kisses turned to something more passionate.

"Jesus, guys, you have two rooms to choose from, ugh, gross." Sam dropped his book bag on the kitchen counter.

Dean dropped his head into Cas's chest, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. "Hello, Sam," Cas called, "How was school?"

"Pretty good. Have an asston of homework."

Giving it up for a lost cause, Dean climbed off of Cas, finding his shirt and pulling it on. He went over to the kitchen to talk to Sam, their voices low and conspiratorial. Cas's newly purchased cell phone buzzed. He had a text from Michael.

"Hey guys? Michael's parking the car. Says he's coming up, has something to show us."

Both Winchester brothers' eyes widened.

"You think it's something about the emancipation?"

"Maybe," Dean said slowly. "Guess we'll find out."

Michael didn't keep them waiting. He arrived about ten minutes later, his blue eyes twinkling, a smile on his face. "So, got a package today." He set a manila folder on the counter. "Your dad signed the papers and sent your school records. You're a free man, Sam Winchester."

Sam face lit up. "Really? Just like that?"

"Yup. John didn't contest the emancipation agreement. He signed it and sent it back, and that's all it takes. You're a free man," he said again.
Pumping his fist in the air, Sam let out a loud whoop, then turned and grabbed Dean, pulling his older brother into a tight hug.

"Congratulations, Sam!" Cas said happily.

"Happy for you, Sammy," Dean mumbled, his voice muffled by Sam's shoulder.

"C'mon, let's go tell Bobby and Ellen," Sam said excitedly. Dean threw an apologetic grin at Cas as Sam pulled him towards the stairwell.

"Be right back," he called, "and don't let that pie burn!"

Michael chuckled. "Nice to deliver good news for once. Those two need a little good news."

"Indeed." Cas walked into the kitchen and opened the oven door to check the pie. "Would you like to stay for dinner, Michael?"

"No, I need to get home. Listen, Castiel," he said quietly, "I may have told Mom about Sam and Dean and their situation, and she wants me to tell you to bring them 'round for Thanksgiving."

"No," Cas said flatly.

"I don't think you're really being given a choice here bro. There was some vague mention of 'cutting you off', which I assume means your living allowance. It's just one dinner, how bad can it be?"

"Dean and I are dating."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Well, you don't have to bring that up," Michael offered apologetically.

"Will Luc be there?"

"No."

"Hmm."

"Castiel…"

"I'll think about it. I'll discuss it with Dean. And I'll let you know."

Michael smiled again, and adjusted his red tie. "Well, I can't ask you for more than that. Hopefully, I'll see you there." He patted the folder. "Have Sam look through this. There's a few packets from some universities in there. I saw 'Hopkins' on one them. Remind him that I'm alumnus there. Might be able to help him get some aid, if he gets accepted."

"Will do. And thanks, Michael. I know they appreciate it, but I can't thank you enough for helping Sam and Dean."

"It's no problem." He gave Cas a perfunctory hug. "See you soon, little bro."

"Yup."

Michael disappeared into the stairwell, and Cas leaned back against the stove. Thanksgiving at home.
That would be a novelty.

He wondered if Sam and Dean Winchester were ready for the force of nature that was James and Amelia Novak. Cas laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls of the empty firehouse.

The better question was whether his parents were prepared for Dean Winchester.

Chapter End Notes

So yes, Cas's parents are Amelia and James Novak. Because Dean is using the faces of the actors we know and love for the angels, you'll have to picture James and Amelia's children as variants of Misha and the lady that played Amelia. Michael looks just like Cas, but older. I will describe the other family members when you meet them in the next chapter. Thanks guys!
The Family We Choose

Chapter Notes

About the Novak Family-
Cas's brothers look like Misha and the actress that plays Amelia Novak, but with the personalities of the angels on the show (except for Raphael, who's just a sweet little kid). I chose to not use the likenesses of Speight, Pellegrino, etc, because Dean is using them for the angels. I hope that make sense.

November 2000

Dean didn't know what to expect when he pulled into the Novak's driveway, but he sure as hell wasn't expecting a gated entrance lined with large oak trees, and he sure wasn't expecting Cas's parents' house to be a mansion.

He punched in the code Cas gave him, and the heavy wrought iron gate swung lazily open. Dean maneuvered the Impala up the drive, parking it next to the Mercedes convertible he recognized as Michael's. There was also a sleek, brand-new, cherry red Corvette sitting next to it. Cas had told him that was Gabe's car.

Up until two days ago, he'd had no idea Cas came from money. He didn't have a taste for expensive things. He wasn't a snob like the rich trust fund assholes at school. He didn't look down his nose at Dean like some of the people that commissioned his work. He didn't act like Dean was less, simply because he didn't come from titled bloodlines.

Cas was just...Cas.

A roll of nervousness tossed his stomach. A powerful feeling of *do not belong* settled in his gut, hard and heavy and very unwanted.

Cas sighed in the seat next to him, and muttered "here goes nothing" under his breath. It couldn't have been much clearer that he'd rather be anywhere but there, at his parents' home on Thanksgiving. Dean didn't quite get it. He couldn't wrap his head around the idea that someone with two caring, *living* parents wouldn't want to spend the holidays with them. Cas had told him his parents didn't approve of his homosexuality. But, really, how bad could they be?

Putting the car in park, Dean looked over at Cas, who was staring forlornly out the passenger side window. He reached across the seat and threaded their fingers together.

"It'll be ok, Cas. It's just your family. How bad can it be?"

Cas turned his head and looked at Dean, apprehension brewing in his eyes as he pulled his hand away. "Ask me that when it's over."

Sam leaned over the seat. "Dean's right. We're both here with you, and it's going to be fine. You brought back up."

"Yeah…” Cas sighed. "Come on, let's get this over with."
The back door opened, Sam let himself out, and Cas's hand reached for the handle of the passenger door. Dean reached across the seat and caught Cas's fingers with his own again. Blue eyes stared back at him, and Dean could actually see fear in Cas's gaze.

"Hey. Seriously. I'm going to be right there with you. It's going to be ok. I promise." He reached out and cupped Cas's chin in his hand, pulling him forward for a soft kiss. Cas returned the kiss briefly, then pulled away with an angry little sigh.

"I can't even introduce you as my boyfriend. Tell me in what universe this is going to go ok? It's a disaster waiting to happen."

"Oh, c'mon, man, it can't be that bad. They're your parents, and they love you right?"

Cas nodded.

"Well that's half the battle right there. My dad hates me."

"Dean...I don't think that's true..."

"It is, trust me. Now come on, find Mr. Positive, and let's go."

Castiel sighed again, squeezed Dean's hand, and slid out of the car. His shoulders slumped, as he started walking to the door.

"This is gonna be a blast," Dean muttered, pulling himself out of the car, and joining Sam and Cas on the doorstep. Jamming his finger into the doorbell, Cas rocked back on his heels. "I do not want to be here," he growled petulantly. "We could be having pie and watching football at Ellen's. I don't want to be here."

"It'll be ok," Dean said quietly.

"I can't even tell them..." Cas said quietly, "I can't tell them about us. The best thing in my life, and I can't talk about it."

Dean grinned at the best thing in my life, but he knew how unhappy Castiel was. "It's going to be ok," he said again, squeezing Cas's shoulder.

"Yeah. You've got us, Cas," Sam confirmed.

The door swung open, and an older version of Cas smiled at them, blue eyes twinkling. He reached out and pulled Cas through the door, wrapping him a hug. "Hello, son. Good to see you, kid."

"Hey, Dad," Cas replied, his voice muffled by his father's shoulder. They separated, and Castiel gestured to Sam and Dean standing behind him. "Dad, this is Sam and Dean Winchester, my housemates. Guys, this is my Dad, James Novak."

"Please, call me Jimmy," he smiled, and Sam and Dean both shook his hand. "I'm pleased to finally meet you. Michael's told my wife and I quite a bit about you boys."

"Pleased to meet you too," Sam said pleasantly, and Dean nodded his assent.

"Well, come on in fellas, I imagine Amelia's about to put dinner on the table."

"I'm sorry we're late, Dad."

"No skin off my nose, just you know how your Mom is."
“Yeah,” Cas murmured, following his dad into the house.

The inside of the Novak home was as fancy as the outside. Apparently, being the Senior VP of community and public relations for the Baltimore Ravens paid extremely well. Dean had been a little star struck when Cas told him what his father did, and warned him not to let one Rufus Turner become aware of such information, or Bobby's old friend would soon be bugging him for tickets.

As they followed Jimmy down a long hall, Dean took in the expensive looking artwork on the walls. He even recognized a few of the artists, and had to work to keep his mouth shut, not wanting to look like an idiot.

He'd never felt so out of place in his life, and he'd been to many a fancy gallery show where the price of admission was more than a used Volvo - but - he'd been one of the artists displaying work. That made him slightly more comfortable, and was his ticket to fitting in.

Here, he had nothing.

Castiel's parents were conservatives. They refused to acknowledge Cas's sexuality. They, well, Cas's mom anyway, felt Cas was wasting his intelligence on pursuing a degree in English and Creative Writing. They had hoped Castiel would go into law, as Michael and Lucifer had done, although, from what Dean understood, no one was very happy with the way Luc was using his law degree, choosing to be an ambulance chaser, while Michael had settled into the far more respectable field of Family and Elder Law.

He wasn't sure what Gabriel did, mainly because Cas wasn't sure, but said it was some type of media or entertainment venture. Whatever it was, it paid nice enough to buy an '01 Vette.

Cas got along with his family just fine usually; but he didn't feel comfortable at home anymore. He didn't feel anyone in his family truly understood him, and who he was, and what he wanted from life.

As he'd told Dean, he felt like an incredibly round peg in a world of square holes.

Dean could relate.

Dean's eyes had widened at the sight of Amelia Novak's fancy dining room, and Castiel watched in fascination as Dean's walls clicked into place. He could actually see his boyfriend putting on a mask for his parents, hiding behind the security of the character he'd created for the occasion.

Sam on the other hand, was totally himself. Smooth, comfortable, confident, the seventeen year old fit right in with the Novaks, with his newly minted acceptance to Hopkins, and his educated, well-spoken manners.

Jimmy sat at the head of the table, Amelia at his right, Gabriel next to her, and Sam next to him. Cas sat on the other side of his father, Dean next to him, and Michael at the other end. Raphael was seated next to Dean, his blue eyes wide and curious, watching every move the Winchesters made.

Dean seemed to have a natural affinity for children, and several times during the meal, Raffy laughed out loud at some silly thing Dean said or did to amuse him.

Amelia didn't seem to appreciate the lack of decorum at her Thanksgiving table, but Cas was glad to see his ten year old brother laughing. The boy was often far too serious.

The difference in the Winchesters was made more evident when Dean's opinion of global warming was asked, and Dean tripped and stammered over his words. Sam took pity on his brother, launching
into an explanation of the things Al Gore was right about, confidently arguing his points with Amelia. His mother was impressed with Sam. That much was clear, and Michael had already developed a soft spot for the young man.

His brother, Gabriel, spent quite a bit of time openly staring at Sam, occasionally slipping in a totally inappropriate and not very funny joke, but he seemed completely fascinated with the young man.

"So, Dean," Amelia began, a forkful of sweet potatoes in hand, "tell us about your paintings."

Dean flushed, and awkwardly fumbled with his cloth napkin. Cas put a hand on his thigh, under the table, patting his leg comfortably.

"I um. I paint angels."

"Really? That's fascinating. Are you a Believer then?" Amelia dabbed her face delicately with her own napkin, eyebrow raised as she looked across the table at Dean.

"Uh...well, no, not really. I'm not sure I really even believe in angels."

"Then why paint them?"

"I just...I think they're kinda cool. I mean, you see all this crap about fluffy little cherubs and then you actually read the Bible. They're not like little winged kids, they're warriors, guardians," Dean took a sip of water, and Cas could see the change in his face as he warmed to his subject, the one he knew better than all others. "God used them to carry out his will, to bring judgment on his people, or to deliver important messages. The archangels were fierce, absolute. If they had to be compared to human counterparts, I'd say they were God's generals on the battlefield."

"You seem to know this subject quite well, Dean. I assume you noticed our sons' names?"

"Yup," Dean said with a grin, "Michael, God's second in command." Michael smiled at this. "His most powerful archangel, but charged with the unpleasant task of throwing his brother, Lucifer, into hell when he disobeyed. Lucifer was the most beautiful, the Morning Star, but his disobedience and rebellion destroyed him. Gabriel," Dean smiled at his Cas's brother, "the messenger, trusted by God to deliver the news of Jesus's impending birth to Mary, and is said to have strong feelings for humanity. He was present at both the birth and resurrection of Christ." Dean turned to smile at Raphael. "And Raphael, the healer, giver of mercy to humans, but still a powerful force and not an angel to mess with." He reached out and tousled Raffy's blonde hair, and the boy beamed at Dean. No matter what the rest of the Novak clan thought of Dean, he'd definitely won Raffy over.

Castiel noticed that Sam was watching Dean with a deep expression of pride on his face, and Cas knew how he felt. For all that Dean denounced himself as the 'stupid' Winchester, claiming Sam was the brains between the two of them, he was shining now, his angel knowledge and passion for the subject matter obvious in his voice and his animated expression.

"And what of Castiel?" Jimmy asked, a smile on his face. Cas was pretty sure Dean had won his Dad over as well.

"Castiel, Angel of Thursday, special guardian to those born on the day and keeper of prayers made on a Thursday. Rumored to be the seraph that led the garrison charged with leading the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah."

"Ironic," Amelia said coldly.

Cas's heart sank. He stared down at his plate.
"Ironic?" Dean asked. His hand found Cas's under the table, fingers weaving through his, and squeezing.

"Yes. Cassie fancies himself a homosexual, after all," said a drawling voice. A tall, blonde man with icy blue eyes strolled into the dining room, and Cas's heart sank.

"Don't call me that."

"Luc," Michael said shortly. He didn't seem pleased to see their brother either.

"Sorry I'm late, Mother," he leaned down and pecked her cheek, "but I had a client I needed to speak with. It was important."

"That scumbag Alastair? The pedophile?" Michael asked scathingly, disgust in his voice.

"Oh, here we go," Gabe muttered.

"Innocent until proven guilty," Lucifer smiled. He pulled a chair in between Sam and Michael, grinning over at the teenager. "Well, hello. Who are you?"

"Sam Winchester," he replied evenly, refusing to be intimidated.

"Nice to meet you, Sammy."

"It's Sam."

"Luc Novak. I'm sure Cassie has told you all about me, if you are the Sam I'm to assume he's living with. Which would make you Dean?"

Dean nodded warily.

"Now, look, let's have a peaceful Thanksgiving, boys," Jimmy looked pointedly at Lucifer. "I will throw you out. Son or not."

"I won't cause any problems."

"Good."

"Although, you probably want to ask Cassie here why he's holding that boy's hand under the table."

The blood drained from Cas's face, and he felt sick to his stomach. Dean squeezed his hand tighter.

"Would you like to explain that, Castiel?" Amelia asked.

Cas shook his head, refusing to look up from his plate. Tears burned his eyes, and he clung to Dean's hand.

"I'd like an explanation, Castiel."

"Leave him alone, Amelia," Jimmy said quietly.

"He knows how we feel about that," she hissed at her husband.

"Well, you're wrong."

Every eye at the table turned to Dean, who'd spoken so quietly, Cas was sure he'd misheard.
"Excuse me?"

"You're wrong," he said again, voice gaining confidence.

"Raphael, go to your room."

"But Mom!"

"Now."

Raffy pulled himself to his feet, glowering at his mother before taking his plate and stomping from the room.

"Explain yourselves."

"Cas and I are together. We're boyfriends. And I'm not ashamed of that. And if you were any kind of mother, you wouldn't be ashamed by who your son is. It's not like anyone wakes up and says, oh ok, I think I'll be gay today!"

Sam's mouth dropped open, and Gabe and Michael were both hiding grins, sneaking looks at their mother's scandalized face.

"But the Bible says it's wrong, son," Jimmy said quietly, not sounding at all convinced.

"Yeah, well the Bible says a lot of things that're crap. Like, the Bible says we're not supposed to eat pork. Better put that nice pineapple ham in the trash, Mrs. Novak. Oh, and I have tattoos over most of my body. That's a straight ticket to the hotbox."

Gabe lost it then, hiding his laugh in his wine glass.

"Better put that wine glass down, Gabe, ain't supposed to drink either."

"Are you mocking my mother?" Lucifer asked coldly.

"I'm not mocking anyone. But you know what? The Bible, well Jesus actually, said sin is sin and that no one sin is worse than any other. And if you're going to vehemently uphold one rule out of the Bible, you better be prepared to stick with all of them, or else you end up looking like a total hypocrite. So the way I see it, Cas's homosexuality isn't any worse than your defending slimy pedophiles in the grand scheme of things."

Luc's face turned bright red with anger, and Michael grinned, slapping Luc on the shoulder. "He's got you there, bro," Michael said gleefully. "I like you, Dean. You say it like it is."

Amelia was quiet throughout Dean's entire speech. "I suppose you think you're funny, Dean?" she said icily.

"I think I'm adorable."

"Well, I'm not impressed. I think you and your brother should leave."

"Now, Amelia…"

"No. I will not be shamed for my beliefs in my own home."

"You know what?" Castiel said, finally finding his voice, "I'd rather not be here anyway. Thank you, Mother, for a lovely meal. We'll see ourselves out." He stood, yanking Dean to his feet.
They were out the door, in the Impala, and halfway back to the firehouse before he finally remembered to breathe.

"That was horrible!" he blurted out, startling Dean so much, the Impala swerved slightly.

"Jesus, Cas!"

"Well, he's right. That was pretty horrible. And your brother Luc? Creepy as fuck," Sam added.

"He wasn't supposed to be there. I'm sorry you were both exposed to that. And my mother…” Cas trailed off with a sigh.

"You know what though? I probably didn't do you any favors opening my big mouth. I'm sorry, Cas. I just made things worse."

"No! You stood up for me, Dean. No one's ever done that before."

"You know, they don't define who you are, Cas," Sam said quietly, leaning forward and resting his hand on Cas's shoulder. "They don't make you. Look at me and Dean. Dad did his best to fuck us both up, and we're doing ok."

A wry smile crossed Dean's face. "Yeah. Free will, man. No one can force us to do anything we don't want to do. Not even our parents. I mean, look at us," he pointed to himself, "an insomniac, mental case art freak", he waved his hand towards Cas, "a nerdy, gay, disowned English major," he waved towards Sam in the back, "and a punk-ass kid who wants to stare at old books for a living. Check us out. Team Free Will."

Sam and Cas both laughed. Sam put his other hand on Dean's shoulder. "I think we're badasses, personally."

"Yeah, well, there's that too." Dean looked at Sam in the rearview. "Hey, sit back and put your seatbelt on!"

Sam huffed, but complied, settling back against the seat. Cas reached over the front seat and took Dean's hand.

If nothing else, he still had a family. The one he built. Two broken brothers, Ellen, Bobby, Jo, and Benny...he had family. He loved them. And they loved him.

For now, that would have to be enough.

Now

The drive down I-83 was very quiet. Sam stared out the window of the rental, watching Baltimore roll past.

"I don't think you should come into Ellen's with me," Sam said abruptly.

"Um. Ok?"

"Dean's there. Ellen said he's having...a moment. And while I am completely onboard with you possibly stopping his wedding, I am not onboard with torturing him when he's already having a bad day."

"Ok."
"Good."

Awkward silence filled the car again.

"Sam? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you keep trying to find me?"

Sam sighed, "I was a little preoccupied. And then when I finally did think about trying to find you, they kept telling me he was dying. I didn't think...I didn't think I should find you, just for you to lose him again. Then, once he was better, and talking and communicating again, he told me not to find you. He didn't want you to see him. I should have looked for you anyway. But let's be real here, all three of us fucked up this situation."

Cas nodded.

"And now, we can fix it. Maybe. I don't know. I just know marrying Anna isn't fair to her, because he'll never be as dedicated to her as a husband should be. Because he's always going to be saying what if, and she deserves better than that."

Cas didn't say anything further, his gaze fixed on the highway before him. Sam stared out the window, absently tapping his fingers on the armrest.

The evening was dark, and there was a faint mist on the windshield, like it was trying to snow or rain, but the weather couldn't seem to make up its mind.

The silence in the car was oppressive, but Castiel didn't know what to say to Sam. He had no words of comfort to offer, and his thoughts were on Dean, and what had happened to him since he saw him at the mall, what had led to him ending up at Ellen's.

Sam sniffled. "I just want him to be happy," he said quietly. "I just want…" he sniffled again. Cas chanced a glance at Sam, surprised to see tears freely rolling down the other man's cheeks. "Cas, I don't know if I'm doing the right thing here, encouraging you to do this. What if I lose him? What if it's too much? I'm putting my big nose where it really doesn't belong. What if he hates me for this?"

"I don't know what to tell you, Sam. I'm feeling pretty lost myself. I don't know how I would even begin to...last time I saw him, he told me to stay away. He doesn't want anything to do with me, and I'm not going to force myself on him."

Cas pulled the Prius into an open spot in front of the Roadhouse.

"I think you should talk to him. Not tonight, but soon. I could," Sam took a deep breath, roughly wiping at his eyes, "I could set something up. Some way for you to just, y'know, just run into him. Make it look innocent."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"I don't know. You got a better one?"

"Not really."

Sam sighed. "Stay in touch, ok? Give me your phone." He took the phone from Cas, messing with it for a sec. "There. I put mine and Dean's numbers in there. Just don't use Dean's. Not yet. Ok?"

"Of course."

"I'll be in touch. And thanks for the ride." Sam pulled himself from the car, hurrying into the
Roadhouse.

As Cas pulled away from the curb, he paused for a minute, staring at the darkened windows of the firehouse.

With a sigh, he merged into traffic, leaving Remington - and his memories- behind.
All the Warmth We Can Find

He heard the voices, heard them discussing him, and what had happened, but he didn't want to open his eyes. He was perfectly happy pretending to be oblivious. The conversation sounded fairly serious. Ellen's quiet voice was joined by Bobby's deeper tone, and Sam's slightly raised, concerned words.

She'd called Sam.

Of course she called Sam. Because Dean couldn't be trusted to look after himself anymore. That's what it had come to. The little brother became the big brother, and he wasn't the caretaker anymore, he was the taken-care-of.

Dean thought maybe he should be mad about that, but he couldn't find it in him to care. He just rolled onto his side in Ellen and Bobby's big bed, away from the door and the voices discussing him like he wasn't even there. Of course, in their defense, they all thought he was sleeping.

Ellen had brought him back to her place after he broke down, tucked him into her bed, and he'd passed out.

Well, actually, he'd cried himself to sleep like an overtired toddler while Ellen rubbed his back, but hopefully she wouldn't mention that to Sam.

He heard a door open and close, and the voices faded away to nothing. The bed springs compressed, as someone sat next to him.

"I know you're not asleep. You breathe differently when you're sleeping."

"Shut up."

"It's true."

"Who asked you?" He rolled over, glaring up at Sam. "And who called you anyway? I can take care of myself."

"Sure."

"I can!"

"Dean, you're a hot mess right now, you know that, right?"

Dean huffed, and rolled back over, away from Sam. "Leave me alone."

"Will you just stop? Tell me there isn't something wrong with you, go ahead. I was there. I saw you turn white and run out of the mall. That was pathetic, dude. Seriously."

"I just. Cas - I don't -" Dean fumbled his words, trying to come up with something that didn't sound ridiculous or like a ton of bullshit.

"What about Cas?"

"Nothing, Sam, nothing." He shoved the blanket down, and got out of bed, looking around for his jeans. "I don't want to talk about Cas. I want to go home."
"Well, I'm a little drunk still, so I'm not going to be able to take you anytime soon."

"I can drive myself, thanks. And why are you drunk?"

"Because I drank alcohol. That's generally how it works, right?"

Dean glared at him. "Yeah, no kidding. Why though? Where did you go after the mall?"

"Out to dinner."

"With?"

Sam avoided his eyes. "A friend."

"A friend…huh."

"Yeah, and it's no big deal, so don't make it a big deal."

"Yeah. Sure, Sam." Dean yanked his jeans on, slipped his feet into his sneakers. "That's nice. Get drunk with Cas while I'm down here losing my shit over...over..." Dean couldn't bring himself to say the words. He stormed out of Ellen's bedroom, crossing the living room, ignoring Sam's voice calling him. He thudded down the stairs into the Roadhouse.

Ellen and Bobby were busy with customers and didn't notice as he slipped out the back door. He walked up the alley, past Benny's, to the back door of the firehouse.

It was locked. With the keys inside.

Cursing, he pulled Benny's door open, hoping he could get the spare key from him without much discussion. The bar was packed with the Saturday night crowd. It was loud, and the noise bothered him. He looked for Benny at the bar, but his old friend was nowhere to be found.

Cutting through the crowd, he pushed out onto Remington through the front door and ran smack into eight feet of hard muscle.

"You really just ran away from me. Where were you going? Ellen had your keys." Sam dangled the keychain, and Dean snatched at them, but Sam held them over his head.

"Dammit, Sam!"

"Come on. We need to talk."

"I don't want to! I'm tired of talking. I'm going to get my car and go home."

"Fine. If you can get your car keys from me, you can go. Fair enough?"

Dean growled, lunging at Sam, but the asshole was just too tall, and he gave up after a few aborted attempts.

He stood silently while Sam unlocked the firehouse, flipping the lights on as he closed and locked the door, stowing the keys safely in his jeans pocket. Dean sulked all the way up the stairs, flopping down on the couch with a sigh.

"So, I'm guessing you're going to need a ride somewhere, Mr. Drunk Ass."

"No, I'm good. I have your keys," Sam said with a grin, "so we'll just wait until I'm sober. Capisce?"
"Whatever," Dean grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest. Sam moved around the firehouse, switching on lights. He crossed to the thermostat, muttering about the chill.

"Hey, I have to pay for that, y'know!"

"Well, it's cold in here! We'll turn it back down when we leave." Sam disappeared into his old room, and came back a moment later with two old ratty hoodies. "Here, put this on before you freeze or something," he said, tossing one at Dean.

Dean grudgingly put it on, not looking at Sam. Looking anywhere but at Sam. He picked at a hangnail, tugged on a string on his jeans, played with a piece of paper he found in his pocket, stared out the window, and studiously ignored his brother.

"He was, is, my friend too, you know?" Sam said quietly. "You weren't the only one who lost him." Sam scratched the inside of his elbow. "I get it. I do. But I still have the right to be his friend. You don't own either one of us."

Dean yanked his body off the couch and stormed across the living room to his bedroom, slamming and locking the door behind him.

"Dean! Come on, man, don't be like this." Sam knocked on the door. "C'mon, seriously, don't do this. We need to talk. We do." Silence. Then a creaking noise, likely the sound of Sam sitting against his door. "Dean, c'mon. You don't need to open the door, you just need to listen."

Settling down against the shut door, Dean sighed and pulled his knees up to his chest. He could almost feel his brother's body heat through the door, or maybe it was just wishful thinking. He knew he was acting like a child, but the situation was such a mess. It was fucking with his head and making him question everything, and that was just something he didn't need right now.

"Dean, I wasn't trying to...shit. I don't even know where to start. I just...you're not happy. And it bugs me. You're marrying someone you're not even in love with."

"What gives you the right, Sam?" Dean asked quietly.

"Nothing, I guess," Sam sighed, "I just...I hate seeing you like this. I want you to be happy, I want you to paint again, I want my...I want my..."

"What?"

"I want my brother back," Sam whispered.

Dean heart clenched. Sometimes, he forgot. He forgot it was Sam sitting by his hospital bed every day. He forgot it was Sam holding his hand, begging him not to die. He forgot it was Sam who was there through every step of his recovery.

He stood, brushing off his hands, and carefully opened the door.

Sam blinked up at him, tears in his big puppy dog eyes. Dean plopped down beside him, both of them leaning back against the wall separating Dean's room from Cas's.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"I just...I had everything figured out, Sam. I was getting married, and teaching, and I was good. I
was good. And now...now I don't know what the hell I'm doing anymore."

"You're scared."

Dean scoffed. "Of what? Of Cas? I'm not scared of Cas."

"No. You're scared of what Cas is making you feel."

"Sam. Don't. C'mon, man."

"You're still crazy about him. And you see him and it all comes right back."

"Sam..."

"Still got that tattoo, Dean? No Wrecking Balm? No surgery? It's still there, right? How did you explain that one to Anna?"

"Dammit, Sammy, what do you want from me?" Dean pushed to his feet, angrily pacing the floor.

"I want you to be honest with yourself!"

"And what does that mean? Huh? What, exactly, am I lying about here?"

"You're not in love with Anna!"

"How the fuck would you know?!" Dean yelled.

"Because if you were, seeing Cas wouldn't fuck you up like this!" Sam screamed back.

Dean reeled. "Sam..."

"No, Dean. If you were truly over him, truly and completely in love with Anna, Cas's presence would have no effect on you other than some passing nostalgia. You. You are - you are still in love with him!"

"No..." Dean whispered.

Sam jerked himself to his feet, "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't feel a damn thing for him. Tell me that Dean, and I swear I will let this go. I swear."

Dean flopped into the couch. He had nothing left. Sam was right. Sam was right, and he was completely fucked. "What am I supposed to do, Sam? What do I do?"

"End the engagement. ASAP."

"I can't Sammy. I can't do that to Anna."

Sam settled onto the couch next to him. "And marrying her when you're not in love with her is the right thing to do?"

"I don't know. I don't fucking know anymore."

"Well, I think you'd better figure that out. And soon. Before you make one hell of a mistake."

Sam stood again, and vanished into the bathroom, leaving Dean alone with his thoughts in turmoil.
November 2000

"So I'm gonna go watch TV and play cards with Bobby, Ellen, and Jo. They said I could spend the night. Bye!" Sam called pleasantly, making himself scarce the minute they got to the firehouse.

It might have had something to do with the smoldering looks Dean and Cas had been throwing at each other the whole ride back from the Novak's.

It had started when Cas unbuckled and moved to the middle seat belt. Cas didn't think Sam could see everything his hands were doing in the front seat, but he'd likely noticed Dean's hitched breaths and the time that fire hydrant had appeared to be in imminent danger of Death-by-Impala.

Sam had kindly closed the big doors behind him, and Cas turned to Dean, watching as he shut the Impala off. They sat for a minute, listening to the engine tick. Dean reached over, carding his fingers through the hair at the base of Cas's neck.

"Hey. I'm sorry. I think I must've really screwed things up for you today."

"No. No, you didn't. Luc can take the blame for that one. Things were going pretty ok until he showed."

"Yeah, but my big mouth," Dean sighed. "I'm sure I didn't help the situation."

"Honestly? When you stood up for me? Dean, that felt so good." He reached for Dean's other hand, pulling it to his mouth and kissing his work-roughened fingertips. "You're wonderful."

Dean scoffed.

"It's true. I wish I could make you see just how wonderful you are." Cas shifted his position, Dean's hand falling from his neck as he climbed into Dean's lap, straddling his thighs, back wedged against the steering wheel. He tilted Dean's head back, leaning in for a kiss, parting Dean's lips with his tongue.

Fingers found his hips, sliding up under his coat and hoodie, digging into the skin of his hips.

"Taste so good, Cas," Dean murmured, pulling him impossibly closer. Cas ground his hips down into Dean's lap, pulling a gasp from the other man. Dean's hand left his hip, and there was a click as the seat belt released. Dean shifted them, pushing back and laying Cas out on the seat.

He ground their hips together, mouthing at his neck, hand sliding under layers to reach the bare skin of Castiel's chest.

"God, want you, Cas. Want you so bad," he whispered.

"You have me. Anything you want, Dean. Anything." They shifted together on the seat, hips aligning. Dean was grinding down frantically, hardness hot against his own.

He pushed his tongue into Cas's mouth, sweeping over his teeth and gums. It was frantic, and messy, and way too fast.

Both of them reached orgasm without removing one stitch of clothing, and after, Dean lay on Cas's chest, panting in the cool air of the steamed up Impala.

Cas ran a hand through Dean's sweaty hair, kissing his forehead.

"Shower?" he asked softly.
"God, yes."

They gingerly pulled themselves from the car, Cas grimacing at the cooling mess in his pants. He waited for Dean to close the Impala and lock up the firehouse, then took him by the hand and led him up the stairs and into the bathroom.

"Cold in here," Cas complained, slipping out of his coat.

"I can fix that," Dean said with a smile. He stripped out of his clothes, and stepped into the shower. Dean opened all eight taps, turning them all the way to hot. Within moments, the bathroom was filled with steam. "Better?" he asked with a smile, adjusting the temperature to something a little less than scalding.

"Much," Cas grinned, pulling away his own clothes and stepping into the shower.

"Come here," Dean smiled, holding out his hand.

Castiel stepped into the circle of his arms and let Dean pull him close, let Dean tip his head back and kiss him. He wrapped his arms around Dean's waist and stood under the spray, enjoying the wet skin to skin contact and the sound of Dean humming softly.

"What's that you're humming?"

"Zep." He pecked soft little kisses along Cas's neck, hands sweeping down his back. Dean laid his head on Cas's shoulder, face turned into his neck, softly singing. "Yours is the cloth, mine is the hand that sews time, his is the force that lies within," more soft kisses along his neck, Dean's fingers dragging along his spine, "Ours is the fire, all the warmth we can find, he is a feather in the wind." Dean raised his head, cupped Cas's face and kissed him, long and deep, then lowered his head back to his shoulder, "All of my love, all of my love, all of my love to you."

Castiel's heart swelled. He looped his arms over Dean's shoulders, holding him close as they gently swayed in the shower, moving in and out of warm sprays.

At some point, in between kisses, shampoo and soap were found, and they got clean, more or less. Dean shut off all the taps while Cas fetched fresh towels, and they were both hard again by the time they finally tumbled into Cas's bed, pulling the blankets up over still damp bodies.

Cas snuggled against Dean's side, fingers walking across his shoulders, tracing the lines of the anti-possession tattoo.

"Are you sure you're ok, Cas?" Dean asked him quietly.

"Yes. I think so, anyway. It's been a long time coming."

"But I really, I just, I think I made it worse. And they're your family."

"Dean, I meant what I said. I'm not upset with you." Cas propped himself up on his elbow, smiling down at Dean in the dimness of the bedroom. "You stood up for me. Don't you know what that made me feel like? I felt wanted, like for once, someone cared about me."

"I do care about you, Cas, a lot. Hell, I'd give you pretty much anything you wanted." Dean blushed slightly. "I'm pretty crazy about you," he said softly.

"I'm crazy about you, too," Cas smiled, leaning down to kiss him. Dean's fingers curled into his damp hair, pulling lightly. It was like a match, lighting him up inside, and he kissed Dean harder,
sucking the breath from him, swallowing every little noise Dean made.

"Jesus, Cas," Dean breathed, when they finally separated.

"Dean, I want...I want…"

Green eyes sparkled up at him, a sweet smile on his handsome face. "What do you want, Cas? I'll give it to you."

"I want to…” Cas's cheeks flamed, and he buried his face in Dean's neck, whispering the words into freckled skin, "inside you."

"Oh," Dean said quietly.

All of the things they'd done, all the ways they'd touched each other, pleasured each other, with fingers, mouths, and sweet words, they'd never taken that next step.

"Um -I've uh - I've never…” Dean stuttered.

"Me neither," Cas told him softly.

"But you - I thought you?"

"Not that."

"Oh."

Cas felt his cheeks flame again. "I know the basic mechanics. I have seen some - seen some…”

"Gay porn?"

"Yeah."

"Oh," Dean said again.

"You don't have to. It was a stupid idea."

"No. I want to, Cas. I do. But I don't know what I'm doing either. I've only been with, y'know, girls, and none of them wanted to - so I'm just. Guess I'm a virgin here, too. So we'll have to learn together, right?"

The warmth that always filled him when Dean was being insanely sweet welled up in Cas's chest. "Yes, I um, I guess we will."

Cas reached over Dean's body, pulling open his nightstand and getting a bottle of lube and a condom. Dean's eyes tracked his movements, and he smiled, eyes twinkling with the orangey glow of the streetlight outside the window. "Looks like you were prepared, at any rate."

Blushing furiously, he set the items down on the bed. "I was hoping…”

"It's ok, Cas. It's ok," Dean reassured him.

"I um, maybe you should be on your hands and knees the first time."

"Uh-uh. I wanna see you. We'll make it work."

Nodding, Castiel grabbed a pillow from the top of the bed. "Put this under you. To prop you up a
Dean got settled, and Cas flipped the bottle open. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

Cas nodded. "Ok. Ok." He carefully coated his fingers with lube. "Are you ready?"

"I um, I think so. Just go, y'know, go slow. 'Cause I don't...just go slow."

"Ok." Cas ran a hand down the inside of Dean's spread legs, reveling in his little shiver. He circled his entrance with a lubed finger, and Dean shivered again.

"C'mon, Cas, do it."

"Ok, ok, I just don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. I'll tell you. Promise."

Cas nodded again, and then carefully, gently, slipped his finger inside of Dean. Dean gasped.

"Did that hurt?"

"No. No...just feels weird. But doesn't hurt. I swear."

Sighing, Cas pushed his finger in further. The heat and tightness that wrapped around his finger was amazing, and imagining his dick being surrounded by Dean's body took Cas from nervous to painfully hard and leaking in about five seconds.

Dean was breathing hard, hips moving against his hand, pushing down onto Cas's finger.

"You like this, don't you?" Cas asked him, "feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Dean gasped. "Cas, more, c'mon, more."

Cas gently pulled his finger out, then pushed back in with two, and Dean's back arched off the bed.

"Holy fuck," he whimpered, "god, Cas, fuck!"

With a grin, Cas dropped his head, swallowing Dean's red, swollen cock. Dean moaned, a low sound in the back of his throat, as Cas sucked hard, experimenting with the noises he could drag out of Dean, what combination of mouth and fingers produced a whine, a moan, a whimper, a curse, a rough cry.

Dean fell apart, hands clenched in the sheets as Cas added a third finger, hips grinding helplessly, dick pulsing in Cas's mouth.

"Oh, fuck, I'm ready, Cas, I'm ready. I'm ready, please, please, oh fuck, oh fuck," he babbled. Cas's fingers found a raised spot inside, and he dragged his fingertips over it, producing the absolute most broken cry from Dean, and an intense arching of his back. "God, fuck me now, Cas, c'mon, fuck me!"

"Ok, ok," Cas muttered as he reached for the condom packet. Rolling it on with shaking hands, he positioned himself over Dean after smearing more lube on himself.
"C'mon, Cas, please," Dean whined.

Cas leaned down, kissing him gently, Dean winding his arms around his neck, one hand tangling in his hair. He reached down between them, stroked himself once, then put the head of his own penis in Dean's stretched open hole. "Oh fuck," he whimpered, pushing in, the head pushing past the tight ring of muscles.

Dean groaned, as Cas kept steadily pushing in. When he was fully seated, he pulled back slightly, looking into Dean's wrecked face. His eyes were wide, green overwhelmed by the black of his blown pupils. There was just enough light to see the flush of his skin, the sheen of sweat on his forehead.

"Does it hurt? Am I hurting you?"

"It's gonna take some getting used to," Dean said breathlessly.

"But does it hurt? I don't want to hurt you."

"It's ok, baby. Do it, Cas, move, do it."

He pulled back, pushed in again, and Dean's hips moved with him, pushing and pulling as well, aligning to Cas's rhythm, gasps and groans and other delicious sounds punched out of him with every movement.

Dean wrapped his legs around Cas's waist, still clinging to his neck for dear life.

"Oh, god, I'm not going to last, Dean, I'm not going to, god, it's too much, it's too much!" Heat and tightness, it was overwhelming, and it was more than Cas could handle.

"It's your first time, baby, it's ok, it's ok," Dean soothed, slipping one of his hands off of Cas's neck, working it down between them, stroking his own neglected dick while Cas continued to pound into him, overwhelmed, chasing his own orgasm.

"Let go, baby, let go. Come for me," Dean whispered, and that was it.

Cas arched his back and howled, hot seed exploding from him and filling the condom.

"Fuck," Dean moaned, and his head fell back as he spilled between them. Cas collapsed on his chest, not caring about the sticky mess between them.

They lay there for a long time, dazed by the intensity. Dean ran his fingers through Cas's hair, and Cas traced aimless patterns across Dean's chest.

"We should do that again sometime," Dean said softly.

"Mmm, we should."

Cas gently rolled off of Dean, took care of the condom, and grabbed a dirty shirt from the floor. He wiped them both clean, then crawled back into Dean's arms, pulling the blankets over them.

Dean kissed his forehead. "You're amazing," he murmured.

"You're amazing, too," Cas whispered back.

A comfortable silence fell over them, and Cas felt himself drifting off into peaceful sleep, head pillowed on Dean's shoulder.
His last thought before dropping off was that as far as Thanksgivings went, this was the best one ever.
December 2000

November faded into December. Castiel survived his midterms, as did Sam, and the two of them kept house while Dean made progress on the Raphael painting. Winter break had Cas out of school, and he came home one day, about two weeks before Christmas, to find Dean completely immersed in the painting, using his fingers and his whole hand to add color to the canvas.

Raphael was a regal African American woman, tall and queenly, elegantly attired in a tailored aubergine suit. Dean had painted her so that her bright blue, grace-lit eyes stared imperiously downward at whoever was looking up at the painting. She was so completely different from Lucifer, in her bearing and the look of absolute contempt on her face.

Cas stood for a while, watching Dean dance across the middle section of the scaffold. He'd given her an angel blade, and that's where the red on his hand was going, dripping onto what looked like a corpse at her feet.

For once, there was no music playing, and the only sound was the rough rasp of Dean's fingernails as he scraped the red paint down the canvas. He was in his own world, lost in what he was doing, and he hadn't heard Cas come in, or set his things down, hadn't heard the door shut.

He stood and watched him move, paint stained, ratty blue jeans slung low on his hips. Dean moved gracefully, back and shoulder muscles rippling against the threadbare fabric of the stained black and red flannel he was wearing. He was beautiful, economy of movement and bare elegance, every part of his body involved in the painting process.

I love him, Cas thought unexpectedly, heart swelling with warmth. I love him.

An irresistible need to touch Dean had Cas climbing the scaffold. He cleared his throat when he reached the level Dean was on, and Dean turned, hands covered in red paint, a smile blooming on his face when he saw Castiel.

"Hey. Didn't hear you come in."

"You were distracted. And busy."

Dean wiped the red off his hands with a rag. "Never too busy for you." He grimaced. "Did that sound as corny as I think it did?"

"Yes, but I'm fine with that."

They both chuckled.

"So this is looking good," Cas smiled.

"Thanks," Dean sat down on the scaffold and stared up at the section he'd just been working on. "She's really different from Lucifer, isn't she?"

"Yes, but she should be. Raphael was more obedient."
"Mmm." Dean ran a hand through his hair, and Cas burst out laughing. "What?"

"You have red paint in your hair, silly."

Dean grinned, reached up and grabbed Cas's hand, pulling him down into his lap. He ran his fingers through Cas's hair. "There. Now we match."

The *I love him* feeling bubbled up again, as Cas stared into twinkling green eyes, Dean's pretty lips quirked into an adorable grin as he looked up at Cas. He leaned in and kissed him, Dean's hands sliding down to rest on his hips, pulling Cas in closer when the kiss deepened.

Castiel took his time, tasting every inch of Dean's mouth, pressing his tongue inside, gently biting his bottom lip.

Dean unzipped Cas's hoodie and pushed it off his shoulders, and slid his hands under Cas's tee. He could feel the sticky paint on Dean's fingers transferring to his skin, and he smiled into the kiss, his own hands cupping Dean's face and holding him still while he took control of the kiss.

"Damn, Cas," Dean murmured, breaking away for a much needed breath. Freckles stood out against his flushed cheeks, and he was breathing hard.

"Where's Sam?" Cas asked, trailing his lips down Dean's neck.

"Upstairs. Studying."

"Have to be quiet then, won't we?"

"Fuck," Dean groaned.

"Mmhmm."

Cas pushed Dean's flannel off his shoulders, then wrapped his fingers around the hem of his threadbare tee, pulling it up and off and tossing it aside. Dean returned the favor, carelessly tossing Cas's yellow Pearl Jam tee over the edge of the scaffold.

He pushed Dean onto his back, still straddling his hips. Dean reached up, brushed his fingers across Cas's chin and down his chest. His eyes were wide, tracking Cas's movement, but there was an odd expression on his face that Castiel couldn't place.

"Are you ok?" he asked softly.

"Yeah, Cas, I'm good."

"Are you sure?"

Dean nodded, "I'm sure." He reached up and hooked his hand around Cas's neck, pulling him down and pressing their lips together. Dean's other arm locked around Cas's waist, and he lost his balance, hands shooting out to keep from dropping all of his weight on Dean.

One palm made contact with something wet and sticky and he sat back up, staring at his hand.

"You ok?"

Cas showed Dean his paint covered right hand, and the other man started laughing.

"Caught you red-handed!" he chortled.
"You're a dork."

"You're the one who put your hand on my palette."

"You're the one who made me lose my balance!"

He glared at Dean, but there wasn't any heat in it, although Dean looked entirely too pleased with himself. Cas reached down and grabbed Dean's left arm, leaving a big, red handprint on his bicep. "There. Now you're red-handed too!"

Dean looked down at his arm, staring at it for a long moment, then another unreadable look crossed his face, but when he looked back up, his eyes had darkened, pupils dilated, and Cas was taken
aback by the unbridled ferocity in his expression. Then he moved incredibly fast, and Cas found himself on his back, staring up into an intense gaze. Fingers dragged along the inside of his thigh, and over the fly of his jeans, unzipping them and slipping inside, calloused fingertips wrapping around the already hard length of him.

Cas gasped, and Dean kissed him, pushing him down onto the scaffold with his entire body, the kiss fierce and passionate, rough strokes unrelenting, Dean's own erection pressing against Castiel's thigh, rutting into his leg. He was like a man possessed, something had set him off, not that Cas was complaining, but in all of the times they'd had sex, given each other pleasure, it had never been like this- this hard, brutal, punishing claim on his body, an intensity that threatened to sweep him over the edge far faster than he would have liked.

"Dean, Dean, oh- oh!" Cas babbled, fingers clawing uselessly at Dean's bare shoulders, helpless against the onslaught. Lips found his mouth again, licking and nipping. Dean was fire on his mouth, fire on his cock, he was everywhere and everything, possessing, claiming, owning. The heat gathered, fast and uncompromising, and Castiel came violently, hips bucking off the wooden boards of the scaffold, his fingernails leaving little bloody trails on Dean's shoulder blades. Dean rutted hard against his leg, only once or twice, and he was gone, coming with a pained groan, collapsing onto Cas's body.

They lay there for a while, Dean's heart pounding so hard, Cas could feel it against his own chest. He carded his fingers through Dean's sweaty hair, as the sticky mess between them cooled. There was hot wetness on his neck, and he realized Dean was crying.

"Dean? Are you ok?" he asked, concerned.

"Yeah, I'm just…" he sniffled. "I'm ok, Cas. I swear."

Hooking his fingers under Dean's chin, he lifted his head. Dean's eyes were beautiful when he cried, the green enhanced by the saline, but he didn't look sad. He looked, if not exactly happy, content.

"We should go shower, before Sammy finds us," Dean said softly.

"Ok."

They sat up, and Dean softly kissed him, then pulled himself to his feet, gathering his discarded clothes. Cas watched him move, following the graceful sweep of his muscles with his eyes, gaze stopping on the perfect red handprint on his left arm.

"Come on, let's go shower."

Castiel nodded, jumping and sliding down the pole after Dean, then following him up the stairs. Sam's door was closed, and Dean ducked into his own room for a moment, then came back, took Cas by the hand and led him into the shower.

They turned on all eight heads again, letting the room fill with steam before climbing in.

Dean was murmuring the words to Wonderwall under his breath again, for all he claimed to hate the song, as he gathered Cas into his arms and buried his face in his neck.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Cas asked him, sliding a hand down his back.

"I'm more than ok."

"Really?"
"Yes."

"Ok."

The held each other close in the hot water, Cas's heart full and content, glowing in the realization that he was in love.

And he was sure Dean felt the same.

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**Now**

"The thing is - he's been weird from day one. We all told you that, Anna," Hester smiled tersely over her mug, "and clearly, he's not over him. Or the dinner wouldn't have gone the way it did."

Anna sighed, stirring her own mug of tea. "I don't know...it could have just been the stress of seeing him after all those years."

"Have you even read that book?"

"Yes," Anna retorted defensively.

"And you still think he's over it? My god, Anna, that relationship...it was intense. Dean was clearly very much in love with Castiel."

"It's fiction, Hester. Castiel probably embellished a lot of it," Anna said, hating how unconvinced she sounded.

"I just think you're making a horrible mistake."

Anna twisted the diamond on her ring finger, fidgeting in her seat. "You, Mom, Rachel...you've all been saying that since day one. None of you have ever liked Dean. It's all crap about how teaching Art isn't really teaching, and you've always looked down on him. From day one, Hester."

"Well, he is a strange one," her sister said, "You have to admit."

"He's been through a lot, you know? He's lucky to even be alive. Give him a break."

Hester sighed and pushed her mug into the center of the kitchen table. "Don't you think he should sell that old firehouse? Why is he hanging on to it? That doesn't sound like someone who's moved on." She reached across the table and took Anna's hand. "I love you, Anna, and I don't want to see you get married and have it end in divorce." She pushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, "you deserve to be completely happy. You deserve someone who's completely dedicated to you. And if Dean was, he wouldn't have lied to you about going to the book signing and he wouldn't have acted like he did at dinner."

"I don't know..." Anna was really starting to regret telling Hester about the dinner, although Dean's behavior had been rather disturbing to her. Still, it wasn't fair for her to give Hester something else to add to her arsenal against Dean.

"I mean, he's always been so indecisive and unsure of everything. You asked him to marry you, it's your house, aren't you practically supporting him?"

"No, he's a teacher, Hester, he makes good money, and you damn well know that! And who cares who proposed? I don't! Don't you get it? He's been through hell. His own father almost killed him, for god's sake."
"And you want to saddle yourself with that for life?"

"Hester!"

"It's just, seriously, Annie, you really want to marry him? With all of his weird little issues and his awkwardness, and all this evidence?"

"Evidence?" Anna asked coldly, "He used to be love with someone else? Oh, yes, that's incredibly damning evidence. God forbid my thirty-five year old fiancé had a previous relationship," she said sarcastically. She stood, pushing her chair away from the table and picking up their mugs. "I think you should leave."

"Fine. But answer me this. He's been gone all day. Where do you think he is?"

Anna frowned, as she set the mugs in the sink. "He had his tux fitting with Sam. They probably went to dinner."

"That was at two, right? It's after nine, Anna."

"Just go. This conversation is over. Let yourself out, please." Anna rested her hands on the kitchen counter, staring down into the sink. Hester huffed behind her, and a moment later she heard the door shut.

She didn't want to admit it, but Hester had planted the seeds of doubt. Oh hell, to be honest, the seeds of doubt had been planted the weekend of the book signing. All Hester had really done was water them.

Her phone rang, and she was relieved to see Dean's name on the caller ID.

"Hi, hon, how did the tux appointment go?" she asked, forcing cheerfulness she didn't feel into her voice.

"Uh, fine. It was, I mean, I'm, it's fine,"

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm great. I'm fine. Um, Sammy and me, well he got a little drunk at dinner, and we ended up at the firehouse, and he's passed out on the couch. So I'm gonna...I'm gonna stay here tonight, if that's ok, I mean, with you? Is that ok with you?"

Anna rubbed her forehead with her fingers, trying to dislodge the headache that was forming. "It's fine, Dean." Yeah, everything was fine. The word of the night, apparently.

"Ok, I'll see you in the morning, after I drop Sam off to get his car. 'Night," he said, hanging up abruptly.

"Good night," she murmured to dead air. Sighing, she shut the lights off in the kitchen, and walked out to the living room. The Christmas lights were twinkling merrily on the tree, and there were already several presents stacked under it, with labels for Dean, her Mom and Dad, and Rachel, Hester, and Sam.

There wasn't anything for her yet, but Dean was a last minute wrapper, and probably had stuff stashed away somewhere.

Anna reached behind the tree, pulling the plug and plunging the living room into darkness. As she
turned back, she stubbed her toe on the chair under the window, knocking something off of it, and
cursing when she realized she'd upended Dean's laptop bag, and that sound had been his laptop
hitting the floor.

"Oh, dammit," she muttered, reaching down to scoop everything back into the bag, hoping she
wasn't going to owe him a new computer.

A white paperback slipped from the case, the depiction of the Archangel Michael visible even in the
dim light cast by a streetlamp outside the window.

She held the book in her hand, the tattered edges proof that Dean had read Painted Angels more than
once, the upper right hand corner of the cover slightly torn in one place, and the outside edges of the
pages were yellowed with age.

Anna sank down into the couch, book in hand, absently reaching out to flip on a lamp even as she
was opening the cover.

The dedication page was the first thing she came to, the evidence of Dean's trip to the book signing
there in black script, page 78, C. Novak. With a sinking heart, she flipped the book open to that page,
and began to read.

"He stood and watched him move, paint stained, ratty blue jeans slung low on his hips. David moved
gracefully, back and shoulder muscles rippling against the threadbare fabric of the stained black and
red flannel he was wearing. He was beautiful, economy of movement and bare elegance, every part
of his body involved in the painting process.

I love him, Carver thought unexpectedly, heart swelling with warmth. I love him."

Underneath was a note, just a few words, and when Anna read them, something inside of her broke.

And I still feel that way. -Cas

Dean woke, disoriented and shivering, in an unfamiliar bed that was somehow very familiar at the
same time. His eyes blinked open, and he stared up at the open beams of the firehouse, the ceiling of
his old bedroom. He groaned, rolling to his side, burying his face in the musty pillow.

He'd honestly forgotten how uncomfortable his shitty old mattress was. That was why they'd always
slept in Cas's bed, with his soft, fluffy pillow top and fancy Egyptian cotton sheets that felt like silk
against his skin.

It had been more than two years since he'd spent a night at the firehouse and more than ten since he'd
actually slept in his bed. The lumps hadn't gone away since then, and neither had that one awful
spring that kept poking at his lower back. Dean would have slept on the couch, but after Sam
decided to finish that half full bottle of Jim Beam he found under the kitchen sink, and crash land on
the couch, that had left him three choices. Sam's old bed was covered with books and crap that he'd
just been too tired to move, and there was no way in hell he was prepared to spend a night in Cas's
bed, so his room had been the only choice.

The firehouse didn't feel like home to him anymore, even though it still held the memories of the
happiest time in his life. Dean didn't want to explore why the feeling of home and hearth had slipped
from the walls, or why he couldn't seem to find the happiness he'd once had there.

And it wasn't just him. Sam had told him more than once that the days in the firehouse were lit with
golden light in his memories.
The door to his room creaked open, and a thoroughly disheveled Sam poked his head through the door, holding up a cup holder with two foam cups and a brown paper bag.

"Breakfast?" he asked, a sheepish smile on his face.

Dean grunted, rolled onto his stomach, and hid his face in the pillow.

"Oh, come on, you can't still be that mad," Sam whined, as he sat on the bed. "It's Ellen's homemade donuts. You know, the ones she only makes for Sunday breakfast? Bet it's been years since you had one of these babies." Dean heard the sound of the paper bag rustling as Sam opened it, and even with his face buried in the pillow, he could smell the cinnamon-y goodness of the warm, fried dough. "Mm, mm, mm. You know you want this. They're still hot. And I have coffee, too."

Dean didn't move. Sam poked him in his side.

"Come on, dude."

"Leave me alone, Sam."

"No. C'mon. I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry then."

Dean rolled over and glared up at Sam. "Do you even know what you're apologizing for?"

Sam blew out a breath, "Uh, not really?"

With a sigh, Dean pushed up to sitting position and reached over, yanking the bag out of Sam's hand. "Pain in my ass," he muttered, digging into the bag for a donut. "Gimme the coffee."

Sam grinned and handed him one of the foam cups. "Here you go, black and disgusting, just like you like it."

"You're the one that makes it sweet enough to kill a diabetic. That's gross."

"Whatever."

They lay back in Dean's bed, eating their breakfast, outer edges of their thighs pressed together. A companionable silence fell over them, broken occasionally by the sounds of eating and drinking.

"I have to go home," Dean said quietly, setting the empty cup on his nightstand.

"What are you going to do? Y'know, about you and Anna?"

"Nothing." Dean got out of bed, and opened the drawers of his dresser, pulling out an ancient pair of jeans and a nearly threadbare AC/DC tee. "I'm gonna shower and go home. You want a ride to your car, I suggest you get up and get yourself ready."

"Dean…"

"No," he said angrily, rounding on Sam, "I'm done talking. I'm getting a shower, and I'm going home. You are going to let this go and stop fucking bugging me about Cas. Maybe I do still care, maybe…but I'm letting it go. I moved on. Anna and I are getting married and that's my last word on it. I just don't fucking want to talk about it anymore. Do you understand?"
Sam looked completely taken aback. "Dean, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to upset you, I swear. I just want you to be honest with yourself."

"Why is my love life so fucking important to you anyway?"

"Because I want you to be happy and you're not happy. You haven't been in a long time!"

"Dude, you mean since Dad took a 2x4 to my head? Yeah, I get it. I'm not the same Dean anymore, but do you really think I can help that? He damaged my head, Sam, it's a goddamn fucking miracle I can even talk, let alone walk or drive or anything. And Anna, she doesn't care. She doesn't care that I'm fucked up and can't paint anymore, she doesn't care! But you, you just can't move past it can you? You can't stop reminding me that you 'miss your brother' and you act like I died, but I'm still fucking here, Sam, I'm still fucking here!"

"Shit, Dean, I didn't mean it like that…"

"I get it, you were happy back then, but you ever hear someone say you can't go home again? Same thing here. Me and Cas getting back together isn't going to fix your life, Sam. You think I don't know what you're doing here? I get it, you lost a lot too, I get that you're fucking lonely as hell, but I'm not responsible for fixing that, dammit! I can barely keep my own fucking head above water!"

A lone tear rolled down Sam's cheek as he seemed to fold in on himself, pulling his knees up to his chest and wrapping his arms around them. "I'm sorry, Dean, I didn't...I'm sorry. I swear. I didn't mean to mess things up for you." He snuffled. "But he was my best friend too, y'know? For the first time in my life, I felt completely safe. And you were so happy. And I was happy. And things were good, hell, things were great. Can you blame me for wanting that back?" Another tear rolled down Sam's cheek, and Dean felt all the fight drain out of him.

"Sammy…"

"No, you're right. It's not my business." He snuffled again, and angrily swiped at the tears on his cheek. "Just go get ready. I need to get home too. Just...just go."

Dean sighed, and dug a towel out of the closet, eyes briefly grazing the leather jacket hanging there. "For what it's worth, Sam, I would change things if I could go back. I would..."

"But?"

"That ship has sailed. It has. I can't go back. And let's be honest, I'm not the guy Cas fell in love with. He probably wouldn't like this Dean any more than you do."

"No, Dean," Sam stuttered, eyes wide, and Dean held up a hand to silence him.

"It's ok. I'm gonna get a shower, and then I'll take you to get your car. And then I'm going home. To Anna. And that's it. That's just how it's going to be. I hope you respect me enough to let it go."

And without another word to his brother, he turned and left the room.

Chapter End Notes

Art by Linneart
Dean pulled the Impala into the drive and shut it off. He sat for a while, listening to the engine cool, mentally kicking his own ass. Anna was gonna let him have it. And he deserved it. He was pretty sure he hadn't even said goodbye to her the previous night.

With a sigh, he pulled his keys out of the ignition and pushed open the door, and was rewarded with a wet blast of snow in his face.

*Ugh. Winter.*

Anna's car was on the street, tucked in against the curb. He was kind of surprised that she was home. She was usually at church by that time on a Sunday morning.

Dean pulled his jacket tighter around him, tucked his chin, and ran for the house, slipping slightly up the porch steps. He fumbled with his keys, hands chilled from the cold, and he was grateful for the warmth of the little house when he finally managed to get inside.

"Anna?" he called out, stomping the snow off his boots. "I'm home."

"In here," she called from the kitchen.

He opened the closet door and shrugged out of his coat, reaching for a hanger. Dean shut the door, and walked out to the kitchen. "I'm sorry about last night, but Sam was in no condition to -"

Dean stopped just inside the kitchen door.

Anna was seated at the table, slender fingers wrapped around a cup of tea. On her left, her sister Hester sat, with her own cup of tea, staring down her nose at Dean, icy blue eyes narrowed.

"Uh, hey," he said, reaching up and scratching the back of his neck, "I uh, I didn't know you had company."

"It's ok," Anna said quietly, not meeting his eyes. She looked at Hester for a moment, mysterious sisterly communication passing between them with just a look, then shoved back from the table, standing and offering her hand to Dean. "Come to the bedroom with me, please?"

Dean's heart climbed into his throat, and he was filled with a sudden rush of dread, but he took her hand and followed her out of the kitchen.

That's when he saw the two suitcases just inside the living room.

He froze, feet glued to the floor, eyes locked on the bags.

"Anna? What's going on?" he asked apprehensively, pulling his hand out of hers.

She sighed heavily, eyes following his gaze to the suitcases. "Just come to the bedroom, so I can talk to you privately. Please?"

Dean couldn't move. His heart was pounding out of his chest, pounding so hard it actually hurt.
"Anna? Is everything ok?" Hester appeared around the corner, reaching out to put a hand on Anna’s shoulder.

"It's ok. Dean and I need to talk, privately."

"Ok. I'll just wait in the car, then."

With his feet still firmly rooted to the floor, Dean watched with detached interest as Hester slipped on her coat, and reached down to take the larger of the two suitcases from the floor. A shudder ran through his body, as he finally seemed to realize what the hell was going on.

"You're leaving," he croaked, a statement, and not a question. "You're leaving me."

Anna sighed again, and stepped into the living room, dropping down onto the couch. His eyes followed her, and not for the first time, he thought she was beautiful. Elegant, graceful, long shapely legs and perfect pale skin, and that gorgeous red hair he'd spent many nights playing with while she slept.

He'd often thought she should have been enough to reawaken his muse. Anna would've have made a beautiful angel. He would have painted her as Anael, with a dark green cloak and an angel blade. A lady warrior, a leader of a garrison.

Even as he thought it, his eyes caught sight of Painted Angels, lying innocuously on the end table, and his hands started shaking. Dean stumbled back two steps, his head spinning.

No.

This was not happening. It wasn't.

"Dean?" Anna's voice came to him from somewhere far away, as he stumbled back two more steps, backing into the hallway, his spine making contact with the wall. His knees gave out, black spots spinning in his vision, as he slid down the wall. This wasn't happening. He'd made his choice, he'd chosen her.

"Dean!"

He pulled his knees into his chest, burying his face in his hands. A moment later, he felt Anna's hands on him, petting his hair and brushing over his shoulder, her voice softly whispering his name. The panic was swept aside as a wave of anger welled up, and he pushed her away, sending her tumbling backwards.

"Did she put you up to this?" he hissed. "Did fuckin' Hester tell you to leave me? Is that's what's going on here? Are you finally giving your family what they want?"

Anna narrowed her eyes, staring him down. "No. They have nothing to do with it." She huffed, all the anger leaving her face, as she sat down across from him, folding her denim covered legs under her. "Dean. Let's be honest here, this hasn't been working for a while now."

"Did she put you up to this?" he hissed. "Did fuckin' Hester tell you to leave me? Is that's what's going on here? Are you finally giving your family what they want?"

Anna narrowed her eyes, staring him down. "No. They have nothing to do with it." She huffed, all the anger leaving her face, as she sat down across from him, folding her denim covered legs under her. "Dean. Let's be honest here, this hasn't been working for a while now."

He shook his head, and pulled his legs in tighter. "It was fine, Anna."

"Exactly. It was fine. But it used to be better than fine." Anna exhaled tiredly, and shifted her body until she was sitting beside him, back against the wall. She reached for his hand, covering it with both of her own, and laid her head on his shoulder.

The anger was gone, burned out as quickly as it came, replaced with a detached acceptance. Dean
couldn't fight this. Her bags were packed and she was leaving.

He felt so incredibly tired.

"Things have been strained since the book signing. You're not happy, although I'm not sure you ever really were. Your behavior, especially when we went to Sotto Sopra, has just been so…unstable. And I don't want to be the person you settled for, Dean. I deserve to be with someone who loves me 100%. And wants to be with me, only me. Someone that doesn't have this closet full of dark secrets.

"The thing is, I should have seen it. You won't sell the firehouse. It's like you're very determined to leave that life behind, but you won't part with the biggest part of it."

Dean felt numb. She was tracing patterns on his hand with her fingers, but it was if his nerves had died. He knew she was doing it, but he couldn't feel it. He couldn't feel anything.

"Sam's no better, you know? He won't let go of the past either. You're both stuck, waiting for something...waiting for Cas? I don't know." She was quiet for a while, stroking his hand softly. "So, yes, I'm leaving. Because I would rather walk away now than have to go through the nightmare of a divorce when this eventually falls apart. Because it will. And you and I both know that. I'm starting the leave I would have taken for the wedding a few days early. I'm going to stay with Hester. I need you to get your things and move out before the first of the year."

Anna sat up, and shifted her body until she was kneeling before him, and she pulled both of his hands to her chest. "Dean? Look at me, please?"

He met her eyes, so pretty, wide and concerned, and so very honest. It hurt. He was numb, but not numb enough, and it hurt.

"The truth of it, Dean, is that I still love you. I love you so much, it aches. But you're not happy. Not really. You're good at hiding it, but that's not healthy, and it's not a good way to start a marriage. So I'm letting you go. Because I love you enough that I want you to find what makes you happy, and be happy, and love and be loved in return. Because that's what I want for you. Even if," Anna's eyes welled, as she turned his hand up and put something cold and metallic in his palm, closing Dean's fingers around it, "even if it's not with me."

Anna leaned forward, kissed him softly, and ran her hand through his hair.

He watched her go, detached and unfocused, as she slipped on her coat, and picked up the other suitcase.

The door shutting behind her said it all, and when he opened his hand and found her ring, it finally registered.

It was over.

He'd failed.

Again.

Dean sat on the floor, unmoving, for a long, long time.

December 2000

A week or so before Christmas, Dean, Sam, and Cas piled into the cab of Benny's black F-150 and
headed north, about thirty minutes out of the city, to a Christmas tree farm in Middletown, not too far from Cas's parent's home.

Cas was amused at Dean, and his rampant Christmas enthusiasm. He and Sam had never really had a full blown Christmas, and Dean was determined he was going to give Sam a picture perfect holiday, from the tree and the ornaments, to the dozens of cookies he'd been baking and freezing, to the thousands of Christmas lights hanging on every available surface in the firehouse. He'd even run a strip of icicle lights around the opening for the firepole.

Raphael was done, and Dean had been using his spare time, until he started Gabriel, to turn the firehouse into two stories of straight up Christmas.

Zep and Metallica had been replaced by Sinatra and Andy Williams, and the whole place reeked of cookie and pine scented candles. Besides the lights draped everywhere, tinsel and garland had been tossed over various surfaces, and mistletoe was hung in strategic places.

Not that Dean ever waited for an excuse to kiss Castiel.

Today, his boyfriend was wearing a red sweater with white pine trees and reindeer on it, and a purple Ravens Santa hat. He was smiling, squished in between Benny and Cas, howling off key Christmas songs in Benny's ear, as they drove up I-83.

The bearded man kept swatting at him, shoving him back over to his own side of the bench, while Sam complained about being squished against the door and Cas's bony hip every time his brother got shoved back over.

Sam was the first one out the second Benny slipped the truck into park, still muttering about being squished in there in the first place. Cas slid out after him, stretching his arms over his head while he waited for Dean, then the four of them headed for the trees.

Cas learned very quickly that Dean was an almost intolerable perfectionist, at least when it came to picking the perfect pine. Benny had his own tree chosen in about twenty minutes, while Dean went from tree to tree.

"Too short. Too scrawny. Too ugly." Dean inspected all the trees in one row, dismissing them quickly.

"How 'bout this one, brotha? It's nice."

"Not green enough."

"This one?" Cas asked him.

"Doesn't smell pine-y enough."

"I found one!" Sam yelled.

"Crooked."

Benny pointed out another one.

"Weird ass needles, look like something from Star Trek."

"There's a nice blue spruce, here."

"Why does it have yellow shit on it?"
"I like this one, Dean," Sam pointed to a nice, tall balsam, and Dean looked it over.

"Yeah, this is a good one." He looked closer. "But, it's got a bird's nest though. Bummer."

"We could take it out," his brother grumbled. Sam pointed to the tree next to it. "How about this one? It's pretty."

"That one is flat on one side."

His face quickly growing stormy, Sam pointed to another tree. "That one then."

"That one looks like Ron Jeremy's dick and I won't be able to stop laughing every time I see it."

"How would you know?" Sam challenged.

"Dude, I know."

"You are so gay, Dean."

"No one asked you, Sasquatch!"

Sam and Cas grew more and more annoyed with Dean, as each tree they found to be suitable was summarily dismissed. Dean led them through the rows of trees, muttering under his breath as he inspected each one.

"I swear, these artsy types," Benny grumbled, as they walked down yet another row of trees.

"Dean, maybe we should just pick one that's mostly ok?"

"No, Cas it has to be perfect."

Sam threw his hands up in frustration. "Fine! You pick it. I'm gonna go get some cider." He stalked off down the other row.

"I'm thinkin' I'm gonna go get a cider too. We'll wait for you two near the checkout, 'k?" Benny happily disappeared after Sam.

Dean reached out and touched the tree closest to him, a thoughtful expression on his face as he watched Sam and Benny walk away. "I'm being a pain in the ass, aren't I?"

"A little bit. Why is this so important to you anyway?"

A wistful look crossed Dean's face, and he looked away from Cas, down the row of trees. "Sammy and I, we've never really had a Christmas before. Vic and I use to put up a little tree, but I've never - and I just wanted," he looked down at his gloved hands, cheeks tinted pink by the cold and a little touch of embarrassment. "It's our first one together," he said quietly, "and I just wanted it to be perfect."

Cas smiled and pulled Dean into his arms. "We're together. Sam's here, and healthy, he's doing great in school, you got Raphael done before Christmas, just like you wanted to. It's already perfect. The tree will just enhance the experience. Besides, once you cover it in lights, ornaments, and tinsel, no one will be able to tell what it looks like anyway."

Dean smiled, leaning in to kiss him, lips cold against his own. "You're right, you know?"

"Yes, I know. Aren't I always right?"
"Yeah, pretty much." Dean kissed him again, holding him tight. "Let's just pick one together. Before Benny leaves us here."

"He'll leave you here. Sam and I will be fine."

"Smartass." Dean took Cas's hand in his, and led him back down the row. "That one Sam showed us was pretty good," he said. "Guess we can get that one."

They picked their tree, and dragged it over to the checkout, where both Benny and Sam were flirting with the girls working there. Cas watched with amusement, while Dean paid for the tree, and a pretty teenager with long, dark hair wrote her number on Sam's hand.

"Hey," he nudged Dean.

"What?"

"Look at baby brother."

Dean's eyes followed Cas's gaze, to where Sam and the girl were standing, his big hand in her tiny one as she wrote the numbers on his skin. "Well, look at that."

"Don't embarrass him, Dean."

"Now, would I do that?"

"Yes. Don't."

He opened his mouth, and Cas lightly punched him in the stomach. Dean grinned. "Nah, it's Christmas. I'll let it go. This time." He finished paying for the tree, then yelled in Sam's direction, "C'mon, I'm finally done. Let's go!"

Sam smiled in apology at the girl, and she stood on her tiptoes, whispering something in his ear. His cheeks turned red immediately, and he self-consciously ran a hand through his hair. The girl tossed him a sassy little look, then turned and walked away.

Benny already had both trees loaded by the time Sam caught up to them, still blushing as he stared at the numbers on his hand in wonderment.

"Awwwww," Dean smirked, and Sam blushed even redder.

"Shuddup," he said irritably, trying, and failing, to hide a smile.

"What's her name?" Cas asked.

"Sarah," he replied dreamily. "She was wearing a Hopkins hoodie. She's gonna be a freshman there next year, too."

Dean giggled, and both Benny and Cas elbowed him in the ribs as he settled between them in the truck.

Sam didn't notice. "I need a car," he said abruptly, "and a job."

"Well, we'll see what we can do about a car," Dean said. "Might be able to find a fixer-upper for you."

"Really?"
"Yeah, really."

"Cool."

"And Ellen needs another server. She told me las' night. Jo's been workin' too hard, not gettin' her studies done," Benny added.

"Well, there you go. Go see Ellen when we get home."

Sam nodded, staring out the window, no doubt thinking about the lovely Sarah.

Dean's fingers threaded through Cas's own, and he leaned over just enough to lay his head on his shoulder. "That was fun," he said quietly.

Castiel nodded, and kissed Dean's forehead, settling in for the ride back to the city.

Christmas Day dawned cold, and Dean was sure he could see his own breath when he woke that morning. Goddamn firehouse and it's damn ancient furnace. He really needed to do something about that.

Snow was falling softly outside, the light grey in Cas's bedroom. A check of his watch, and he decided 6 a.m. wasn't worth it, burrowing back down into the blankets, pulling them up over his and Cas's head. He wrapped his arm around the other man's waist, getting as close as he could, Cas's hair tickling his nose.

No, he wasn't getting up anytime soon.

With a soft grunt, Cas squirmed and shifted until he was chest to chest with Dean, his head tucked under Dean's chin. "Cold," he muttered, wrapping an arm around Dean's waist.

Dean pulled him tighter. "It's ok, baby, I'll keep you warm."

"Mmm. Love you," Cas mumbled, body relaxing back into sleep.

A wave of warmth better than anything the furnace could ever hope to offer settled into Dean's body.

Cas loved him. He loved him. People didn't say stuff they didn't mean when they were half asleep. Cas loved him. No one, outside of Ellen and his mom, had ever said that to him before.

Yeah, there was no way he was going to be able to go back to sleep now.

He wanted to hear Cas say it again, but he didn't want to wake him up. Dean pressed a kiss to Cas's head, fingers carding through the soft hair at his neck.

Someone loved him.

Cas loved him.

Shit, this was turning out to be the best Christmas he'd ever had, and it hadn't even really started yet.

Cas loved him.

Dean wanted to laugh, wanted to sing, wanted to roll Cas onto his back and cover him in kisses.

Cas loved him.
He was restless now, and wanted to get up, maybe make breakfast. But there was no way he was getting out of bed. Not when he had Cas, all warm and snuggly, wrapped up in his arms, his heart swelling with the memory of Cas's words.

"Why are you squirming?" Cas asked irritably, words muffled by Dean's chest.

"I'm happy," Dean smiled.

"Because it's Christmas?"

"Because of you. You're awesome, you know that?"

Cas propped himself up, blue eyes blinking sleepily at him. "What did I do?"

"You said you loved me."

"Oh. Is that all?" Cas snuggled back into Dean's side.

"Is that all?" Dean spluttered. "Dude, you said you loved me!"

"Well, I do. Can we go back to sleep now? It's too early."

Dean laughed. "You grumpy Angel of Thursday, you put that on me and want to go back to sleep? Don't you know what a big deal this is?"

Cas popped back up again. He was smiling, and leaned in to kiss Dean's nose. "It is a big deal. I'm sorry. But, I do, you know? I do love you."

"You know what? I love you, too. I just - I dunno, I thought it had to be some big deal when you tell someone that."

"Nah. Being in love doesn't have to be a soap opera. I love you, you love me, that's good enough, right?"

"More than good enough. I'm still, just kinda, not weirded out, but…"

"Overwhelmed?" Cas asked knowingly.

"Yeah." Dean pulled Cas closer, bringing their lips together. "Overwhelmed," he whispered, as they broke apart. "That's a good word for it."

Cas pushed Dean flat on his back, covering him with his body, hands slipping into his shirt. "I know other ways to overwhelm you, gorgeous."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

There was a knock on their door. "Hey, you guys up?" Sam whispered loudly through the closed door.


Sam pushed the door open. "Dressed at least?"

" Mostly," Dean grumbled, as Cas rolled off of him and sat up in bed. "Why?"
"I think the furnace broke. I turned the heat up, but it won't come on. And I'm freezing."

"Argh, that stupid piece of old ass crappy oily disgusting shit!"

"Tell us how you really feel, babe," Cas quipped, reaching for the hoodie hanging on the bottom of the bed. "C'mon, get up and work your magic. I'll get the coffee going. Sam will help me make breakfast."

"Yup, I will," Sam said pleasantly, leaving the room.

"Dammit!" Dean whined.

"Hey," Cas bent over him, and kissed him, "I love you."

Dean grinned. "Love you, too," he murmured against Cas's lips. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas to you, too."

Two hours later, the furnace was running again, and Dean was freshly showered and dressed, and the three of them were opening presents.

Sam was admiring the new watch Cas had gotten him, and the antique Jules Verne books Dean had bought him. He was sitting in one of the recliners, one long leg tossed over the arm, carefully thumbing through the pages of 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. He was also wearing the new Hopkins hoodie Michael had sent him.

Cas was looking through the book about angels Dean had gotten him, the Led Zeppelin shirt he'd bought him lying across his legs, and a few new CDs stacked on the coffee table. He looked up, and caught Dean's gaze, and smiled, mouthing I love you.

Dean's cheeks heated, but he smiled, looking down at the leather jacket in his lap. It was reddish-brown leather, with pockets and straps everywhere, and fit him like it had been made for him. He loved it already, and couldn't wait to wear it when they went to Ellen's for dinner. He also had a nice set of new brushes from Sam.

Cas set his things on the coffee table and stood, stretching, then disappearing into his room for a minute. When he came back, he had a large and bulky object in his arms, covered with a blanket, and he set it down on the coffee table.

Sam was smiling at him knowingly, as Cas sat on the couch beside Dean. "I have one more thing for you, Dean. It's under there," he smiled, pointing at the blanket.

"Ok," Dean reached for the blanket, carefully pulling it off.

All the air left his lungs.

He reached out, fingers ghosting along the varnished wood, lightly plucking the strings, his eyes filling with tears.

"How?" he rasped.

"Gabriel knows a man who fixes them. I know what it means to you, and I couldn't stand the thought of you losing it."

Dean picked up the guitar, fingers lovingly brushing over the place on the neck where the guitar had broken. "You had it fixed. You fixed my mom's guitar," he whispered, words getting stuck on the
lump in his throat. "God, Cas, this is just, this is just...thank you. Thank you so much." He strummed a few notes on the guitar, carefully tuning it. "I can't even...I mean, I don't have words for what this means to me. God, Cas. I love you," he said, setting the guitar back on the table before throwing himself into Cas's arms.

"Love you, too," Cas murmured, hugging him back.

Christmas was wonderful, relaxing and pleasant, wrapped in the warmth of the family he'd chosen. Cas was showered with presents from everyone, and they pushed tables together in the Roadhouse for a big group dinner.

Benny had made several pecan pies, and a big pot of gumbo. Ellen and Bobby provided ham, pumpkin pie, and rolls. Tessa and Pamela brought potato salad and coleslaw. Rufus brought Johnnie Walker and collard greens. Andy and Ash brought sweet potatoes and a solid buzz.

Dean provided cookies, and Cas made apple pie.

They all laughed, and stuffed their faces, then Dean brought out his newly repaired guitar, and they sang Christmas carols. Rufus brought dreidels and Hanukkah gelt and taught them how to play.

By the time Sam, Dean, and Cas headed back to the firehouse, they were all warm and full, and Dean was buzzed from the Johnnie Walker. They bid Sam goodnight, and Merry Christmas, and headed to Cas's room.

"Hey, did you bring your angel book in with you?"

"Yeah, it's right here," Cas handed it to him, "Why?"

"Something in there I need to show you." Dean tossed his jeans on the floor and pulled his red Christmas sweater off, tossing it on the floor as well, crawling into bed in his boxers and a black tee.

"Look, c'mere."

Cas stripped down to his tee and boxers, crawling in beside Dean and snuggling up to him.

Dean had opened the book to a painting, one that had clearly been painted in medieval times. "So there's this story, about a man, who loved his brother. He loved his brother so much, that when his brother died, well, was murdered, he sold his soul to Lucifer, trading his brother's life for his place in Heaven. He was dragged into Hell, but his brother lived. They called him the Righteous Man."

The painting depicted a man, hands raised in supplication, surrounded by flames, and an angel was reaching for him, hand clamped firmly around the man's arm.

"Because he was righteous," Dean read, "and had traded his soul for the life of his brother, God decreed that he should be saved from Perdition, and sent his angels to rescue the soul of the Righteous Man. The battle was fierce, the angels repulsed by the demons of Hell at every turn, but in the end, one brave and ferocious Seraph was victorious, and bore the Righteous Man's soul to safety." Dean smiled. "Read the angel's name," he said, pointing to the description below the painting.


"Remember that day, when we fooled around on the scaffolding?"
"Yes. I got paint on your…” Cas's eyes widened, as he looked from the painting to Dean's arm. "On your arm. On your left arm. Just like the painting." He shook his head. "Oh, that's weird. That's...that's amazing."

"I thought so too," Dean said, as he set the book on the nightstand. "Which is why, you know, why it just...it did something to me." He scratched his head. "When we came upstairs to take our shower, I went in my room and took some pictures of it. It just didn't seem like an accident, it felt like...it felt like fate." Dean took a deep breath. "So yesterday, I went to see Pam. And I had her do this."

Dean sat up on the bed, pulling his shirt off. There, on his left arm, was a perfect handprint, done in red ink.

Cas's handprint.

"Merry Christmas, Cas," Dean said softly.

"Oh," Cas breathed, his hand reaching out, subconsciously fitting his hand over the mark on Dean's arm. "Oh," he said again, completely overcome with emotion.

"I love you, Cas. I love you so much."

Words failed him. All he could do was stare at the perfect outline of his own handprint on Dean's arm.

"You saved me. Do you know that? You saved me," Dean said softly, breathing the words into Cas's skin as he pressed soft kisses along his neck. "I love you," he said again. "I love you, I love you, I love you."

He finally moved, turning and pushing Dean down against the bed, straddling his hips. "I love you, too, Dean, I love you so damn much." He leaned down, kissing him hard, stealing the breath from his lungs, and his hand gently wrapped around the fresh tattoo. "And tonight, baby, I'm going to show you just how much I love you."

They didn't need the furnace to keep them warm that night.

Chapter End Notes

The leather jacket Cas gave Dean is the one he had in Purgatory.
Nothing Left Inside of My Chest

Chapter Notes

Warnings for mentions of past child abuse, violence, and alcohol abuse.

January 2001

They fell into a routine after the holidays. Dean pushed on, starting the Gabriel canvas and working a few shifts at Benny's. Sam took three shifts a week at the Roadhouse, and spent as many evenings as he could with Sarah Blake, driving the little Honda Civic Dean had found him up and down I-83 to her Hunt Valley home.

Castiel found himself completely cut off by his parents, although his dad sent a $500 check in December and again in January, and then it became a regular thing after that. Cas picked up a job at a used bookstore around the corner that was run by an old kook with a government paranoia. Frank wasn't a bad boss, but he was definitely a strange boss.

Dean moved into his room permanently after the first of the year, citing his shitty mattress as a good reason to share space, not that Cas would have turned him away to begin with. They celebrated Dean's twenty-second birthday on the 24th with a loud party and lots of booze at Benny's, and then managed to top it with an even louder party four days later when the Ravens won their first Super Bowl.

Castiel found himself buried in schoolwork not long after that, as his senior year was rapidly coming to a close, and he started hunting for possible internships.

In between working and school, he and Dean spent all their free time together, learning everything there was to know about the other, exploring each other's bodies, and falling more and more in love with each passing day.

Valentine's Day weekend saw both Dean and Sam down with a horrible case of the flu, and Cas found himself juggling the usual work and school demands, all while taking care of two very sick Winchesters. Ellen taught him how to make her signature chicken noodle soup, and he moved Sam into his room with Dean to make it a little easier for him to care for them both. It was a solid week before either of them felt well enough to sit on the couch and watch TV, and about three weeks total before Sam went back to school, and Dean went back to working on Gabriel.

March passed without incident, and Dean finished Gabriel. The archangel was depicted as a short man with light brown hair and interesting honey-brown eyes. He had a lollipop hanging out of his mouth and in a nod to Cas's own brother, a bright red Corvette had been painted in the background. Dean's penchant for using found objects was shown in the actual hubcap on the Corvette's wheel, and the candy wrappers on the ground at Gabriel's feet. His halo had been fashioned of more candy wrappers, in this case, gold and silver foils off of hundreds of Hershey's Kisses.

There was still a big bag of them in the freezer.

St. Patrick's Day was just a blur in Cas's memory, notable for one amusing little moment. Well, amusing to Dean at any rate. He woke on the 18th, naked in bed next to an equally naked Dean,
with an odd pain in his ass, and was surprised to find he was the proud owner of a brand new shamrock tattoo, identical to the one on Dean's (and he assumed Benny's) ass. The anger didn't last very long, as Dean was soon distracting him with well-lubed fingers and his filthy wonderful mouth.

The routine was comforting. School, work, time with Dean, making Sam's school lunches, cooking dinner, sharing chores with the boys, laundry, drinks at Benny's, breakfasts at the Roadhouse, lazy Saturday mornings, occasional late night make outs at the piano, double dates with Vic and Bela, double dates with Sam and Sarah, dates just by themselves, movies, dinners, concerts, art shows, it was the life Cas never dreamed he'd have.

The joy in his heart threatened to overwhelm him at times, and then fear would steal in, whispers in his head, that it wouldn't last, that it couldn't always be this good.

And one April afternoon, all of his fears came to a head.

It had been a great day at school. He'd gotten an incredibly good grade on one of his final projects, and had stopped at the grocery store on the way home. It felt like a perfect day for shrimp creole, so he'd picked up the green pepper, onion, and celery he'd need, plus a pound of shrimp. They had everything else at the firehouse.

He dismounted his bike, pushed open the door, and almost walked smack into an old rusty pickup, pulled in next to Dean's baby.

Dean was standing facing the doors, blood slowly dripping down his chin from a split lip, arms crossed tightly across his chest. He was semi-curled in on himself, and it made him look like he was trying to hide, or make himself smaller.

Sam was next to him, screaming incoherently at a man that Cas could only see the back of, but he appeared to be about Dean's height, with wide shoulders, and dark hair peppered with grey at the nape of his neck and the tops of his ears.

"You have no right, you sonuvabitch! Where do you get off hitting him?"

Dean shrank in on himself, as Sam waved a hand towards him. Cas had never seen Dean like that; the fear and shame in his eyes frightened him. The grocery bag slipped from his fingers, forgotten.

He realized he knew who the man was.

*John Winchester.*

His heart sank, and as he stood frozen in the doorway, John drew back his right arm and punched Sam in the face. Sam staggered backwards, shocked, hand rising to his face and touching the blood streaming from his nose.

Cas would swear later that Sam's eyes turned red, as the teen charged and brought his father to the ground.

Benny appeared from nowhere, and Bobby, and the two of them managed to separate John and Sam, the younger man still screaming angry epithets at his father.

Dean had retreated back under the scaffold, eyes wide and terrified, tracking every move his father and brother made. His feet finally seemed to unfreeze from the floor, and Castiel scurried around the vehicles, making his way through the firehouse to where Dean still stood, arms crossed tightly over his chest.
"What the hell, Winchester?! Where you get off hittin' your own boys?!” Bobby was as angry as Cas had ever seen him, trucker hat askew and face red as he restrained Sam in his arms.

"Those two- fuckin' ungrateful brats!” John yelled, straining against Benny's big arms. Cas felt a shudder run through Dean's body as he wrapped his arm around his shoulders. Dean's knees buckled, and he went down, Cas holding onto him the whole way. He turned his head, looking up at Cas, and his green eyes were dull and lifeless.

"You son of bitch!” Sam screamed. "We're better off without you, you sick old bastard! Dean's more of a dad to me then you'll ever be!"

Another hard shudder ran through Dean, and Cas pulled him closer, holding him tightly. "It's ok," he whispered soothingly, "I'm right here, and it's ok."

John's eyes found Cas's, and he didn't like the expression in the older man's eyes. It chilled him, and he found it hard to look away.

"Cas, get Dean upstairs. Benny, you make sure that ass gets in his truck and gets the hell out of here. Sam you get your butt up those steps, boy." Bobby released Sam, pointing him in the direction of the stairwell.

"Don't you ever fuckin' come back, old man. We don't need you, and we don't want you," Sam growled.

"Sam, go!" Bobby shoved him across the floor.

"C'mon, Dean, let's go upstairs."

Cas finally pulled his gaze from John. Dean allowed Cas to pull him to his feet, and they walked quickly across the floor.

"I meant what I said, boy. Y'understand? I meant what I said." The slur in John's voice was more obvious now, his dark eyes menacing as he stared at Dean.

"Shut your greasy trap, Winchester, ain't you done 'nough damage for one day?" Benny growled, yanking back on John's arms and pulling him back towards the doors.

Dean was shaking. Flat out shaking, his chin trembling. Castiel was doing his best to get him to the stairwell, but Dean couldn't stop staring at his dad. Sam caught his brother's expression, and all the anger drained from his face, as he moved forward, taking Dean's other arm and pulling him towards the stairwell.

"C'mon, Dean," Sam said softly, "Benny's got him. Let's just go upstairs. C'mon."

Upstairs, they settled Dean on the couch, and he pulled his knees up to his chest. There was more shouting from downstairs, and several loud crashes, and Dean flinched at each one. He was spooked, badly, and Cas had never seen him like that. It worried him.

A loud engine sound travelled up the stairwell, and Sam moved over to the window. "He's gone," he said a moment later, dabbing at his nose with a damp towel. Cas could see a bruise blooming on the side of his face, and the area around his nose was purpling a bit too. He swept his eyes over his brother, an expression of tired sadness on his face. "Dean? You ok?"

Dean didn't answer, just pulled his legs tighter.
A huffing sound from the stairwell turned out to be Bobby, followed closely by Benny. "He ok?"
Bobby asked, gesturing at Dean.

"He will be," Sam said quietly.

"He's gone. We watched him pull out, an' the firehouse is locked. Wha' the hell happened?"

"I'm not sure, Benny. I came home from school and found him and Dad arguing about something. I
dunno what it was."

"He told me he wished I was dead. After he hit me," Dean whispered.

"Now, why the hell would your own daddy say something like that, kid?" Bobby scratched his head
through his cap.

"Said he wished he could trade me for Mom. I wish he could, too."
The silence in the firehouse was oppressive. Sam looked like he was about to cry, Benny and Bobby
both looked like they'd let John go too soon.

"Better never show up here 'gain," Benny growled.

"Dean, you don't believe…"

"I wanna get hammered," Dean cut Sam off, "I wanna get drunk enough I can't remember my own
name. Ok?"

"Do you think that's such a good idea?" Cas asked him softly, reaching for his hand. "After last
time…"

Dean shoved him off, yanked his body off the couch, and went to his own room, slamming the door
behind him. The sound of lock being turned followed the slam.

"What last time?" Sam asked, eyes wide and concerned.

"Back in November. It's a long story. I'm going to go try and talk to him." He walked across the
floor, feeling their eyes on him. "Dean? Let me in please." Cas tapped on the door.

No answer.

"Here," Bobby said quietly. He'd produced a wire coat hanger from somewhere, unbent it, and stuck
it through the knob's hole, the lock popping immediately.

"Thanks, Bobby."
The older man nodded. "Just take care of him. I swear his old man's a hell of a piece of work."

Cas opened the door, let himself in, and shut it behind him. The room was dim, but he could see
Dean, his curled up form burrowed beneath the blankets.

"Go 'way," came a rough, raspy whisper from under the covers.

"No." He crawled onto the bed, lifting the blanket and crawling underneath. Cas wrapped an arm
around Dean and pulled him tightly against him.

Dean didn't resist. He pushed back into Cas. They were quiet for a long time, as the light from
outside faded into evening, the room darkening. After a time, Dean rolled over, into Cas's waiting arms, snuggling close with his head tucked under Cas's chin.

"For what it's worth, your mattress really is shitty," Cas said quietly, kissing the top of his head.

"Yeah, I know." Dean sighed. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Think I'd be used to it. Ain't the first time he's said that, and sure as hell ain't the first time he's hit me."

"That doesn't make it ok."

"I can't believe I freaked out like that. Big old wuss. I'm sorry, Cas."

"Don't be. He doesn't define you. Remember? Team Free Will."

"Yeah." Dean shuddered. "Yeah."

"I love you," he breathed into Dean's hair.

Dean whimpered, pulling Cas closer. Warm wetness soaked through his tee, but Dean didn't make another sound, and Cas didn't acknowledge the tears. He just held Dean as close as possible, offering as much comfort as he could.

Evening faded into night, and eventually, they both fell asleep, but Cas never let him go.

Now

"Mr. Winchester?"

Dean startled, and looked up into the very concerned eyes of one Krissy Chambers.

"Yes?"

"Are you ok?"

"Yeah, why?"

Krissy shifted uncomfortably, fingers toying with her dark ponytail. "Well, the bell rang like ten minutes ago, and you've just been kind of...sitting there. Are you sure you're ok?"

Dean looked out at the class. All the students were watching the exchange, eyes wide. He felt his cheeks flame, as he scrubbed his face with his hand. God, he was exhausted. He didn't think he'd slept at all the night before. He'd slept on the couch, or at least attempted to, finding himself unable to face the empty bedroom.

Anna had left him. She'd left him. He'd chosen her, made his choice clear to Sam, and she'd left him anyway. Not that he blamed her. He was a mess, he knew that, and it wasn't like…

"Mr. Winchester?" Krissy asked again.

"Uh, yeah. Um. Just work on. Work on your still lifes."

"We turned those in a while ago. We're doing self-portraits now," Kevin Tran said softly.

"Are you sure you're ok?" Krissy asked softly.

"Yeah, I just. I need to. Bathroom. Back in a minute." He pushed away from his desk, stumbling out
of the classroom. Dean shoved the door open, and practically ran over Charlie.

"Whoa, cowboy, where's the fire?" she asked with a grin.

Dean didn't answer, shoving past her and heading down the hall for the faculty room. He felt like he was going to vomit, ignoring her concerned voice as she called his name. He barely made it to the restroom, hitting his knees and emptying his stomach into the toilet. When he was done, he leaned back against the wall, disgusted with his lack of control.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there, in the tiny faculty bathroom, but it had been long enough to get himself good and worked up by the time Charlie found him.

"Dude. What the hell? Are you ok?"

Dean stared up at her, but said nothing.

"Nope. You're not ok. At all. What happened?" She squeezed into the little bathroom, sitting down on the floor between Dean and the wall.

"Anna, she um, she," he took a deep breath, "she left. She left me."

"Oh no," Charlie murmured, reaching over and taking Dean's hand. "I'm so sorry."

"My fault," he muttered.

"What happened?"

"Cas. Cas happened."

Charlie didn't say anything else, but leaned her head on his shoulder, squeezing his hand tightly.

"Pretty bad, y'know. Only my second serious relationship and I managed to fuck it all up. Why the hell did I ever go to that book signing?"

"Maybe because…"

"Don't you dare say it's because I still have something for Cas. I'm so fucking tired of hearing that."

"Is it true?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because if you're still carrying a torch for Cas, no one's ever going to be good enough."

"Anna was good enough."

"Was she really?"

Dean sighed. "What is that even supposed to mean, Charlie?"

"I'm just saying. You were supposed to get married in two weeks. But you never seemed, I don't know, excited? You've been going through the motions for a long time, dude. I've known you longer than Anna has, and you've never seemed like... it just seemed like you were getting married because
it's what she wanted. Like you were doing it for her. I don't think you even care what you want.”

"You know, I'm damn glad you and Sam seem to know what I want, or what I'm thinking. Since I obviously don't," Dean snapped.

"Don't get snippy with me, Princess, I'm just calling it as I see it." Charlie squeezed his hand again. "Believe it or not, Sam and I care about you more than just about anyone in this craptastic world. I care what happens to you. I care if you're happy. You, Sam, and Dorothy. That's all I have Dean. My family's gone. You're my family. So, yeah, I care if something happens to you. I care if you're happy. Don't you get it, dumbass? You're my brother, and I love you. Sam loves you."

Tears stung his eyes, and he blinked them back, determined not to cry in front of her. He was tired of crying, he was tired of breaking down, and he was tired of not being able to handle his own crap.

"I got Steve to cover your classes for the rest of the day. Why don't you go home?"

"Home." Dean snorted. "Anna wants me out by New Year's. I don't know where to go."

"How 'bout the firehouse? Or you can stay with me and Dorothy for a while? I dunno." Dean leaned into Charlie, the lack of sleep the night before hitting him hard. "Want me to call Sam? Does he know yet?"

"No. But yeah, you can call him. I dunno. I don't know what I'm supposed to do."

"Brush yourself off and bounce back, eventually. Eat a lot of ice cream. Make a pie. Come over and watch Dr. Sexy." Charlie pulled out her phone. "I'm going to text Sam, though. I don't think you should be driving. You look like you're about to fall over, and I don't think both of us will get away with skipping class, homey."

"Yeah. Ok."

They were quiet for a time, Charlie's nimble fingers dancing across the keyboard of her phone while she texted Sam. Dean leaned into her, taking a small measure of comfort from her presence. She was the little sister he never knew he wanted, and at least he'd managed to not screw that up.

"Sam's coming. Why don't we get you out of this bathroom? You could hang on the sofa until he gets here. I'll stay with you until next period."

Dean nodded woodenly, and let Charlie help him up.

She was as good as her word, sitting on the couch in the faculty room, talking aimlessly about Star Wars and Harry Potter, keeping him distracted for the rest of third period. Charlie hugged him when the bell rang, and apologized for having to leave. Sam was there not long after that though, and walked Dean back to his classroom to gather his things. They took Sam's car back to Anna's house.

Dean stood in the living room, feeling incredibly uncomfortable in the little house that had never really felt like home to him.

"Want me to help you pack?" Sam asked quietly.

"Yeah, guess I better. We need boxes and stuff and I don't..." Dean trailed off, his shoulders slumped. "You'd think I'd be able to keep at least one relationship from imploding."

"Probably for the best."
"Yeah. Guess you got what you wanted, didn't you?" he asked coldly.

"Dean, I didn't mean it like that. C'mon, man, I'm just trying to help," Sam said, shrugging helplessly.

"You want to help? Go find a store and get some boxes and tape. I don't have much here, shouldn't take too long."

"Dean…"

"Just go get the damn boxes, Sam, ok?!"

"Yeah, ok, ok."

Sam let himself out the front door, and Dean took a look around the living room. All the fight left him as quick as it came, and he dropped heavily onto the couch. God, he was tired. If he sat on the sofa long enough, he'd probably fall asleep. Probably.

Instead, he got back up and walked down the hall, opening the closet in the bedroom. He pulled out his suit and a few jackets and laid them on the bed.

Might as well get started.

He slept in, rising around ten, and called in an order for room service. While he waited, Cas took a shower, trying not to dwell on the events of the weekend, and the things Sam had told him. Thinking about how close Dean had come to dying made his stomach hurt. He knew John Winchester was a piece of work, but he'd never expected anything like that, and knowing that Dean had planned on looking for him…

Cas would have forgiven him. Dean would have found him, and explained everything, and Cas would have forgiven him, would have moved back into the firehouse. It might have been strained at first, but they would have worked it out.

He'd loved - still loved - Dean. Until Dean, Cas had never been in love before. And things had happened so easily, the pieces falling into place with no effort at all. They'd been happy.

With a sigh, he toweled off, and padded into the bedroom of his hotel suite, dressing in jeans and a black tee. There was a knock at the door, and he let the busboy in, taking his tray from him and offering the kid a five spot. Cas ate his breakfast, paging through the newspaper, but not really reading the articles. He was simply too distracted.

Cas folded the Baltimore Sun and laid it back on the table, standing and stretching. He walked over to the window, looking down at the Inner Harbor below. Traffic moved slowly down Light Street, drivers honking at a delivery van parked in a no parking zone, the blockage creating an unpleasant bottleneck.

It was grey and dreary, and the Patapsco River looked dull and dead. Harborplace was mostly abandoned, as the day was really too cold to attract tourists, and most Baltimoreans were at work or indoors.

He wondered what Dean was doing; if he was standing in front of a class of attentive high schoolers, or if he was already on vacation for his wedding, making plans with Anna and preparing to walk down the aisle. He wondered again if Sam was serious about wanting Cas to put a stop to it.

There was another knock on the door, and he turned from the window, crossing the floor in long
strides. Gabe was on the other side of the door, a big grin on his face. "Hey bro," he smiled, "how's it hanging?"

"Didn't I just see you?"

"Oh, I'm hurt. That's no way to greet your loving brother." Gabe pushed past him, into the room itself, taking in the place. "Wow, nice digs. Where's the minibar?"

"It's not even noon."

"It's five o'clock somewhere." Gabe pulled open the cabinet, sorted through the contents, and selected a miniature of Godiva Chocolate Liqueur. "Perfect," he smiled, twisting off the cap and swallowing the contents.

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit, Gabe?" Cas asked drily.

"I'm not allowed to come see my brother on a whim?"

"No. I need at least twenty-four hours' notice."

"Oh, you're funny." Gabe dropped into an easy chair, tossing one leg over the arm. "Thought maybe we could do lunch."

"I just ate."

"Then the harbor? We could go shopping."

"Yeah, I guess...I don't really have anything else to do."

"So no change in Operation Win Back the Green Eyed Hottie?"

Cas sighed and slumped in the couch. "No, but my god - the things Sam told me Saturday…"

"Oh. He told you about their dad almost killing Dean?"

"You knew, too? Did everyone know but me?" Cas asked angrily.

"Well, yeah. Sam contacted Michael for legal advice. If you remember correctly, lil bro, you dropped off the face of the map. Sam needed help. Michael gave it. And since I've always had a soft spot for Sammy, I helped too. We're talking about an eighteen year old kid with the weight of the world on his shoulders. He was constantly being told Dean was gonna buy the farm. So yeah, I helped."

"Why didn't you tell me, dammit?!"

"Because Sam asked me not to. And it was five, almost six years before any of us heard anything from you. Don't put this on my shoulders, kiddo." Gabe was infuriatingly calm, while Cas felt ready to explode. "You could have called once in a while, you know? You left. You vanished. We were all still right here."

Leaning back against the cushions, Castiel felt all the anger drain away, leaving behind a feeling of bone-deep exhaustion. "I'm sorry. You're right. I'm sorry." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs and burying his face in his hands.

"Where did you run off to, anyway? You just seemed to vanish into thin air. I'm curious. Not like you ever talk about it." Gabe said quietly.
"At first? I was here, staying with a friend, Balthazar. We went to school together. But he was interested in more than friendship, and I couldn't...so that didn't last." Cas sat back up, leaning back against the cushions again. "Mom had cut me off. Dad had been sending me checks every month. Guess he felt guilty.

"Anyway, I hadn't been spending them. I had a job. So I had a pretty decent chunk of money. I bought a ticket to Heathrow and spent the next couple of months wandering Europe. I settled down in Paris and became the clichéd penniless writer sitting under the Eiffel Tower with a dog eared notebook.

"And I drank. I drank away every penny I had. Still, I loved Paris. I used to, when I was the drunkest, wander the streets at night and pretend I was with Dean. It was pathetic." He stood again, restless, wandering back towards the window. "Then one night, I just started writing. I wrote about the day we met, about how he looked at me that first time - everything came pouring out."

He turned and looked at Gabriel, who was watching him intently.

"I had a friend, another Paris drunk like myself. He accidentally took my notebook home, left it in the bathroom, and his father got ahold of it. Next thing I know, they're offering me an advance. Clean it up, I was told, so I did. Dean became David, Castiel became Carver, and Painted Angels was born. I emptied everything into that book."

"It paid off."

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess it did."

"And you came home. You know, I was so glad to see you. I missed you. I don't know if I told you, but I missed you every day that you were gone. You're my little brother, and probably the best friend I've got, y'know?"

Cas smiled, "I missed you, too."

A chiming noise interrupted them, as Cas's phone alerted him to an incoming text.

"Better get that, might be important, Mr. Big Time Writer Guy," Gabe quipped. Cas chuckled.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, picking the phone up from the table. "It's from Sam," he murmured, opening the ap.

-It's over. Anna and Dean broke up.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

-I'll try and call you later. Don't contact Dean yet. He's a mess.

"What is it?" Gabe asked.

"Dean and Anna. It's over. I don't know why. Sam said not to contact Dean." Cas sent back an ok, his thoughts in turmoil. "He made it pretty clear he was planning on going through with the wedding. I wonder if she broke it off?"

"What difference does it make? The door's open again, bro. Now all you gotta do is convince him to let you in."

"Yeah." Cas stared down at the phone in his hands, wondering what he should do next.
"Well, I think we should celebrate. Let me take you out for a while, buy you a drink?"

"I don't think so, Gabe. I need time to think. I'm not sure what I should do here, and it seems crass to celebrate."

"Ok," Gabe said easily, hiding his disappointment. "I'll head out then. Get together later this week?"

"Sure."

"And keep me posted, ok? Let me know if I can help."

"Of course. Thank you, Gabe."

"No prob." He let himself out, leaving Cas staring out the window.

From his vantage point on the tenth floor of the downtown Hyatt, Cas could easily see the Barnes and Noble. Not for the first time, he wondered what would have happened if Dean hadn't shown up that day. And why he had in the first place.

Recalling the heat in Dean's eyes that night at the restaurant, when he had him cornered in the bathroom, Cas was sure Dean still felt something for him.

Now, there was nothing in the way. Nothing, save Dean himself. It would be a challenge, for sure. But Castiel was up for it.

And there was no way in hell he was walking away this time.
"Here's the las' one," Benny called, sitting a box down on the kitchen counter. "Sure didn' have much, didja?"

Dean didn't answer, just kept staring out the window. Traffic was moving slowly up Remington, and he watched people go about their lives, feeling all the while like his was standing still.

"Dean?"

"Yeah, Ben, thanks man," he said quietly.

"You wanna go get some lunch? My treat, brotha."

"Nah, I'm good. Thanks for your help."

"Dean…"

"I'm good."

Benny sighed. "Alrigh' then. I'll be next door if ya need anythin'. I mean it, anythin', Dean."

Dean nodded, but again failed to respond. The glass was fogging around the places his fingers were touching, as the rain turned the street below into a stream. He sighed, leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the chilled glass.

Exhaustion wasn't even the right word for it anymore, the tiredness that had seeped into his bones. He stopped sleeping the night Anna left. He laid in bed every night, tossing and turning, before finally settling on his back and staring at the ceiling.

Dean kept losing time. It wasn't anything new, since the so-called accident, but it had been a little worse than usual over the last several days. Sometimes he'd just sit and stare at the wall, or out the window, and time would pass without him even realizing it. It was beyond frustrating, and it kept happening. For instance, he was sure Benny had just said goodbye, but when he turned from the window, he was standing in Dean's kitchen, humming while he chopped green peppers.

"What are you doing?"

Benny looked up, a smile on his face. "Look like ya ain't had a good meal in a while. Was gonna make this for supper anyway. I'll jus' make it here."

"Benny…"

"I know, I know, but I'm hungry, and you're prolly hungry. What difference does it make?"

"I don't want anyone's pity."

"Ain't no pity. Jus' gumbo. And rice. Oh, and my specialty, jalapeño cornbread." Benny shrugged, and went back to chopping. It was clear that he considered the matter closed. "Why don't you move some of these boxes while I'm cookin'?"

Dean huffed, irritably reaching for the first box. He carried it into his room and set it on the bed. It only took a moment to transfer the clothes inside into his dresser. When that was done, he remembered that his sheets needed washing, so Dean stripped the bed and carried the linens to the
bathroom, walking back to the locker room where the washer and dryer were.

Once Dean got moving, he found it hard to stop, and as the firehouse filled with the good, enticing smells of Benny's cooking, he managed to unpack half the boxes. He moved the sheets into the dryer, unpacked some more boxes, and then flattened them for recycling. He used his computer to forward his mail and magazines, and changed the address on his bank account.

At some point, Dean flopped down on the couch, the tiredness getting to him. He stared into space until Benny settled down next to him, putting a big bowl of the gumbo and rice in his lap.

"Eat up, kiddo," he drawled, digging into his own.

Dean did his best, he really did, but in the end he could only eat about a third of the bowl, before setting it back on the coffee table. He saw Benny frown in his peripheral vision, but the big man didn't say anything.

He sat staring at the wall, watching the outside light gradually grow dimmer. His head was starting to hurt, pain pinching just behind his eyes.

"When did I get so goddamn broken?" he asked Benny quietly.

"Ain't broke, brotha. Jus' bent a lil, is all."

"Bent? Huh."

Benny nodded, patting Dean's knee reassuringly. "Yup. All the best of us is a lil bent, Dean." Benny stood, taking the bowls off the table and heading back to the kitchen.

God, he was tired. Dean thought about going to bed early, but after checking his phone and seeing that it was only 4:30, he realized that was just way too early. Reaching for the remote, he turned the TV on, stopping on the first thing he came to. The newscaster was going on and on about another murder in the city overnight, and then about some disturbance in North Korea.

He blinked at the TV and his eyes slipped shut.

When he woke, there was a pillow under his head, a blanket over him, and a note from Benny on the coffee table, letting him know the leftovers had been moved to the fridge. It was well after eight, and Dean was still tired. He moved groggily around the firehouse, shutting lights off, checking the thermostat, and finally collapsing into bed, although he was still convinced that he wouldn't sleep.

He laid there for a while, on his side, then rolled, coming face to face with Castiel.

"Cas? What are you doing here?" he asked, startled.

Cas hummed, reaching out with his fingers to trace Dean's cheekbones. "I miss you," he whispered, his hand sliding down to Dean's neck, down his torso, down down down. "I miss the way you smell, the way you feel, the way you taste. I miss lying beside you. I miss watching you sleep. I miss everything about you. Let me show you, let me love you, Dean. Let me give you everything."

Blue eyes sparkled; hands gently pushed him flat against the bed. Where had their clothes gone? Cas's hands were stroking him, making him hard, his mouth hot on his nipple, and then Cas hovered over his hips, sinking down, enveloping Dean in his tight heat.

"Oh fuck," Dean whimpered, "how are you here? I don't, I don't, fuck, Cas - Cas!"
Cas rolled his hips down hard, taking in every inch of Dean's cock. He writhed above him, ecstasy painted on his features, staring down at Dean with that look, the one Dean remembered so well. The one that said *I see you. Even when no one else does, I see you.*

With a growl, Dean grabbed Cas's hips, sitting up and pulling him closer, fucking up into the other man with everything in him. Their lips crashed together, Cas nipping at his as Dean sucked Cas's bottom lip into his mouth. His hands slid up Cas's back to his shoulders, pulling him tight against his chest.

"Missed you so much, fuck, Cas, you don't even know…"

"I missed you too, I need you Dean, you're everything, don't you know? Don't you know, baby?" Cas was breathless, panting the words in his ear as his hips moved relentlessly, fucking himself on Dean's cock. "Oh, Dean. Dean," he breathed, "I love you."

Dean cried out, his hips slamming up into Cas, and he came so hard he was sure he'd black out.

Instead, he sat up in the dark of his bedroom, panting, soaked with sweat, his wet boxers clinging to his still-throbbing dick. He ran a shaking hand through his damp hair.

"Fuck," he muttered into the dark. "Fuck."

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*May 2001*

For days after John's visit, Dean was very quiet and withdrawn. Sam seemed at a loss, and Dean was actively rebuffing Cas's attempts to bring him out of his shell, despite his best intentions. Dean didn't know how to react to Cas's loving gestures when his thoughts were so twisted and unpleasant.

John's words kept echoing in his head, *you took her from me, you took Sammy from me, I wish I could trade you for Mary* keeping him awake at night, while Cas wrapped around him, doing his best to comfort Dean when the nightmares woke him. He didn't take his mother from John. He knew that at least. It was an accident pure and simple.

May 2nd took a huge weight off his shoulders. Sam turned eighteen, and was legally an adult. Emancipation notwithstanding, Dean was always afraid John would come for Sam. Now he was an adult, and no one could tell him what to do, or where to live, he was truly his own man. They threw a big party for him, with all of their friends, and his buddies from school, and of course, the lovely Miss Blake.

Dean loved watching them together; the light that danced in Sam's eyes when he was with her was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

As the spring drew to a close, Dean threw himself into painting to quiet the demons in his head. Michael was the last one, his final archangel. He wanted him done before Sam and Cas graduated in early June. As least he didn't have to worry about that, having graduated from the Maryland Institute earlier than expected back in January.

June, at least, was something he could look forward too. Ellen and Bobby had offered their oceanfront condo in Ocean City, and the three of them planned on throwing all their shit in the Impala and heading down there after Sam's graduation ceremony. Dean was looking forward to the sun and sand, drinking a little more than he should, and spending time with the two most important people in his life.

By mid-May, he'd made significant progress on Michael. The archangel was a modernized version of
Reni's masterpiece. He'd replaced Lucifer with a lurid green snake. The serpent lay on the ground, head crushed underneath a black leather work boot. Michael was using a working man's vessel. Worn blue jeans, plain black tee, red flannel shirt, olive drab denim jacket - his vessel was a blue collar dude, worn down by years of hard living.

Dean painted his body, he painted the background, and he painted the man's hand, a lethal angel blade gripped tight in his fist. He couldn't see the man's face, though, and as Sam's graduation drew closer, his frustration grew.

He knew how he wanted to finish the painting. The hubcaps for the halo had already been cut into wedges, ready for assembly into the larger formation over the angel's head. The background was done - a crumbling wall and an asphalt parking lot. By the end of May, the painting was pretty much complete, except for Michael's face. The halo was attached, the painting was done except for the damn face.

Cas's graduation was a blur in his memory. He'd been distracted the entire time by the painting, and luckily, Cas seemed to understand, but as time moved along, Dean's mood deteriorated. The client, an incredibly rich sonovabitch who thought he was better than everyone else, had made it clear he wanted the paintings done by June 1st, and Dean was so fucking close he could taste it. He needed that payday.

Crawling into bed beside Cas one night, he tossed and turned, unable to sleep. Cas rubbing his back didn't help. The blow job distracted him (and felt amazing) but didn't help. He couldn't sleep. Michael's blank face loomed in his mind's eye.

Sometime before two, he woke suddenly, surprised at having even been asleep.

He'd seen him. He'd seen Michael's face.

Dean wasted no time, heading back down to his studio, turning on just the spotlights over the canvas. He found his palette, squeezing out globs of paint and pulling out brushes and he lost himself to the work.

There was sunlight coming in the big doors' windows when Cas found him, and Dean was exhausted, but triumphant, hands on his hips as he smiled up at the painting.

"My god, he's you," Cas murmured. He stood on the uppermost level of the scaffold, looking into Michael's green eyes. "He's you. I'm amazed. It's beautiful, Dean."

"I dreamt it last night. The Righteous Man. The Vessel. The Michael Sword. All of this lore and history just congealed and I dunno, I just had to get up and finish him. He's done. He's finally done," Dean sank into a heap on the boards, exhaustion hitting him hard. "I saw it. He was in a cemetery, with the Lucifer I painted. They paced around each other in circles. It was like I could only see his back, and I remember getting so angry because I wanted to see his face. He turned, and it was like looking in a mirror. I woke up and boom!" Dean scrubbed at his tired eyes. "He's done," he breathed, as Cas sat beside him, pulling Dean's head down into his lap and rubbing his back.

"It's the best. Of all of them."

"Thank you. I'm so damn glad he's done." Dean yawned, growing very sleepy now, Cas's fingers carding soothingly through his hair.

"Why don't you get in the shower while I make Sam's lunch? I'll lay back down with you for a while if you'd like."
"Mmm," Dean mumbled.

"No, baby, no sleeping on the scaffold. Every time you do that, you wake up all cramped. Not good."

Dean grumbled, but let Cas pull him to his feet. He slid tiredly down the fire pole, then trudged up the stairs. Cas left him in the shower room, and Dean stood under the stream for a long time, letting the hot water beat down on his tired shoulders.

After his shower, he dressed in worn sweats and his favorite old Zep tee. Dean called his client's assistant and left a message that the archangels were done, then snuggled into Cas when he rejoined him in bed. They curled together, as warm sunlight filtered through the blinds, heating strips of the fluffy comforter. Cas kissed his forehead, as Dean's vision faded and he drifted off.

Michael was done.

He slept well that morning.

June 4th, 2001 dawned bright and beautiful. Cas snapped a picture as Dean adjusted Sam's red tie, sweeping his hands over the shoulders of his black suit. He helped Sam into his black graduation robe, then took a step back as Sam zipped it up.

"Lookin' good, lil bro," Dean said quietly.

"Thanks, man," Sam closed the distance, enveloping Dean in a hug. "Couldn't have done this without you. Thank you, Dean."

Dean nodded as Cas snapped a picture. When they pulled apart, Sam turning away to get his mortarboard off the coffee table, Cas snapped another picture of Dean swiping at his wet eyes. And yet another picture of Dean glaring at him.

"I'm gonna shove that camera up your ass, Cas!"

"No you won't," Cas chuckled, snapping a few more. "You love me."

"Yeah, yeah."

Cas watched Dean's face as Sam slid the pale blue honors scarf on, then the National Honor Society gold cord.

"Not bad, you know, starting school in November and graduating the literal top of your class," Dean said.

"I mean it - I couldn't have done it without you. I never would have managed this back home." Sam fumbled with a piece of paper, carefully folding it and sliding it into the pocket of his suit pants. "I'm so damn nervous about my speech."

"You'll be fine. Damn, Sam, I'm just so...I'm fucking proud of you."

Sam looked up, catching Dean's expression, and his own softened. "I'm proud of you, too. You're awesome."

"You're awesome...bitch," Dean smiled.

"Jerk. C'mon, let's go."
Sam headed down the stairs, mortarboard in hand. Dean grabbed his own suit jacket off the back of the couch, sniffing as he slid it on. Cas reached forward, grabbing his hand and pulling him back. He kissed him sweetly, letting Dean melt against him.

"It's going to be ok. You know that right?"

"Hell, it is ok. I'm just - I'm terrified Dad's gonna show up and make a scene. He called last night, and I don't know how he even found out what day it was. This is Sam's day. He's earned the right to relax and enjoy himself. I'll kill him, I swear…"

"Bobby and Benny will be there, and if you tell them you're worried, I'm sure they'll keep their eyes out. We'll all be watching. Concentrate on Sam. Don't let your damn father ruin your day. Ok?"

Dean nodded against Cas's neck. "Ok. Let's do this."

"I'd like to take this opportunity to tell you a little more about this year's Valedictorian. Sam Winchester came to us in November, after an unexpected move from West Virginia. The teachers at his previous school couldn't say enough about the quality of Sam's character, and the faculty and students have seen examples of it throughout the school year. It's not enough to say that Sam is an excellent student. He's also kind, respectful, pleasant, and motivated. Sam has earned a full scholarship to Johns Hopkins University, where he plans to major in Anthropology. I believe we'll be hearing about his accomplishments years from now. So without further ado, I present to you Archbishop Curley's Most Distinguished Student of 2001, Samuel Winchester."

Cas snapped several pictures as Sam stood, cheeks flushed from the torrent of praise Cardinal Anders heaped on him. It was an interesting experience, taking pictures one handed, since Dean was gripping his other hand hard enough to break, the fear that John Winchester was going to turn up making the experience less than pleasant for him.

Sam spread his notes out on the podium, smiling at the audience. He looked handsome, tall and poised, not a boy, but a young man.

"Students, faculty, family and friends; 2001 has been a banner year for Archbishop Curley, and the young men of this school have made many accomplishments in academics and athletics, earning glory for the school. Many scholarships have been earned, guaranteeing that many Curley Alumni will be heading off to colleges all over the country in the fall.

"All of us should be proud of our many accomplishments. I know that I am. For years, I've dreamed of going to a college that could further my career plans. I never dared to dream I'd get into the one at the top of my list.

"And it's all well and good that we celebrate our accomplishments. Pride may be a sin, but I think it's a bigger sin not to thank God for what we've done with His help."

Dean snorted and Cas elbowed him.

"It's a Catholic school. Behave yourself," Ellen hissed, sitting on Dean's other side. He looked properly chastised.

"But I would remiss to stand at this podium and not acknowledge the sole reason I am standing here before you today. As many of my friends and fellow students know, my mother died when I was just a baby. My father never really recovered from her death. But, there was Dean, my older brother. Dean was only four when our mother died, but he slipped into her role almost immediately. He made my lunches, he bathed me, changed my diapers - Dean raised me. Dean is still raising me. I can tell
you, beyond a shadow of a doubt, I wouldn't be standing here now, about to go to Hopkins on a full ride, if it wasn't for Dean. He's my brother, my best friend, and my Mom and Dad rolled into one.

"Thank you, Dean. Thank you for everything." Sam's eyes scanned the crowd, coming to rest on Dean, who wasn't even trying to hide his tears anymore, as he sniffled loudly. Ellen had one hand, Cas had the other, and he was clinging to them both.

"Did real good with that one, boy," Bobby whispered, and Dean smiled through his tears and nodded.

"So when you get your diploma today, remember who helped you get here. And remember to thank them. Class of 2001, this is our time. Make it count. Thank you."

"I am so proud of him," Dean murmured softly, as the crowd around them applauded Sam's words.

"You should be. Be proud of you too," Cas whispered back, leaning over to kiss his cheek, pleased by the peaceful smile on Dean's face.

"I am."

Two days after Sam's graduation, Dick Roman appeared in Dean's studio. CEO of Roman Enterprises, Dick Roman was a very rich man in a very fancy suit, who smiled with perfect white teeth. He'd ordered the archangels for the lobby of his luxury downtown office tower, and had made a generous offer of payment, but he made Dean's skin crawl.

The previous two days had been peaceful and blissful. John never showed, and they started packing all the things they'd need for the ocean, stuffing the trunk of the Impala. All they were waiting on was Dean's client to pay for his angels.

"They're perfect!" Dick exclaimed, moving from canvas to canvas, inspecting each painting while Dean stood behind him, heart in his chest. "Now, Dean, I'd love to hear about your process and why you chose to paint yourself as Michael, but truth is, I really don't care. They're done, and they look great. Susan, give the man his check."

His assistant handed him the cashier's check, and his eyes swept over it quickly.

"$150,000 as agreed, Dean. Small price to pay for such quality work. The company I've hired to move them will be here in about an hour. Is that good with you?"

"Yes, sir," he answered, folding the check and sliding it into his pocket.

"I have to say, they're better than I pictured. You'll go far, Dean, I can see it. Susan, I'm ready."

"Yes, Mr. Roman."

"I'll be in touch, Dean."

They swept back out of the firehouse and Dean finally exhaled. A pair of arms wrapped around him from behind, scaring him and making him jump. "Jesus, Cas, wear a bell!"

Castiel chuckled, breath hot on Dean's neck. "Sorry," he said insincerely. "So are you all good and paid? Can we go to the ocean now?"

"Yup. Benny's gonna let the movers in and we are getting the hell out of here. A summer down the ocean, hon," Dean said sillily, adopting a Bawlmer accent. "How 'bout dem O's, hon?" he said,
giggling at his own joke.

"You're not a Baltimorean, Dean, you're a Balti-moron."

"Haha, very funny." Dean turned in Cas's arms, wrapping his own around Cas's shoulders. He leaned in and kissed his forehead. "Gonna grab Sam and shove the rest of our gear in the car and roll out. We'll be eating caramel popcorn on the boardwalk by six."

"Mmm. We should stop and put that check in the bank."

Dean nodded.

"I wish I could spend the whole summer with you two down there."

"You can."

"Nope. Parents cut me off. Have to get a better job."

"Dude, I just got paid. I'll support you. Spend the summer with us, being lazy, drinking, swimming, staying up all night, sleeping all day...and did I mention the sex? Lots of sex, Cas. We won't have anything better to do, so we'll just be fucking all the damn time." As he was saying this, Dean was slowly walking Cas backwards, stopping when his back hit the wall.

"You're really ok with supporting me all summer?"

"Mnhmm," Dean hummed, "but", he smiled as he reached down and hooked his hands under Cas's thighs, lifting him easily against the wall, "I'd much rather support you against this wall and fuck you silly."

Cas's eyes widened, and he wrapped his legs around Dean's waist. "Is that right?"

"Mmm," Dean licked a slow trail up Cas's neck, "Oh, hell yeah."

"Guys, are we ready? Wanna beat the beach traffic down there and you know how the Bay Bridge gets on the weekend and oh ew! I'll be at the Roadhouse, don't take too fucking long!" Sam yelled on his way down the stairs - and out the door.

Two hours and a very pissed off Sam Winchester later, the paintings were gone (and damn, it felt weird to look around and not see them) and they were on the road. Five hours and some awful Bay Bridge traffic very much later, they were at the beach, the salt sea air drifting through the Impala's open windows. The Singer's condo was on 34th Street, and Dean commented irritably that it would be a miracle if he could find parking on 34th Street, but he did.

He shut the engine off, and Sam was out of the car like a shot, Cas right behind him.

It was dark when he found them, moonlight making the ocean sparkle. Sam was already in the water, his sneakers and socks on the beach, laughing and shaking his head, water flying off the long strands of his hair, and he was calling out for Cas to join him.

"No, you nut! I'm fully dressed!" Cas laughed.

"I've never seen the ocean before!" Sam yelled. "It's the coolest thing ever!"

Apparently Sam's joy was too much for Cas to resist and he shucked his shoes and ran out into the current, colliding with Sam and knocking them both over. They came back up spluttering, splashing each other and laughing.
Dean's heart swelled with warmth. God he loved them. He loved them both so much, and he wondered if they'd ever really know.

"C'mon in Dean, the water's fine!" Sam hollered, going down a minute later when Cas dunked him.

Dean laughed, leaning down to strip his shoes and socks, dropping his keys and wallet into the pile of watches and wallets Cas and Sam had left behind.

He watched them for a moment longer, then muttered "when in Rome," and ran down the shore to join them in the surf.

The most beautiful summer Cas could ever remember was spent in a sunny sandy haze, liberally coated with more alcohol than any of them should have drunk.

At one point, an extremely drunk Dean got the brilliant idea that they should get Team Free Will tattoos, but they should be secret symbols, done in the language of the angels, Enochian.

He sketched out the Enochian symbols for T, F, and W on his sketchpad, cleaned it up, then called and convinced Pamela to come spend the weekend and bring her stuff.

Sam got his first. He wasn't sure he wanted one to begin with, but after a couple of beers and two shots of tequila, he was feeling pretty convinced. Pamela inked the symbols in bold black just above the bend of his left arm. After it was done, Sam admired it for a while. He then passed out stone cold on the condo's couch.

Cas was next, and he'd chosen a spot on the left side of his torso, just below the ribcage. The needle wasn't comfortable, but Dean held his hand and kissed him while Pamela deftly worked the symbols into his skin.

Dean was last, and he'd chosen to have his done above the anti-possession symbol on his chest. He barely flinched as Pamela worked, but let Cas hold his hand anyway. When it was done, Sam had regained consciousness, and they all crowded around the bathroom mirror, admiring their new ink. Sam then decided he wanted Dean's anti-possession symbol as well, and that involved more alcohol.

Gabe showed up more often than Sam would have liked, flirting mercilessly with him, and it was always unclear whether or not he was serious or just enjoyed seeing Sam turn beet red. Sarah often joined them on the weekends, and she and Sam would disappear, leaving Dean and Cas to their own devices.

Dean had been right: they had a lot of sex.

At all hours of the night - and day.

Cas would wake in the middle of the night to find Dean sinking down on him, having stretched himself out, fucking himself on Cas's cock. He'd wake up to early morning blow jobs. He'd wake to fingers in his ass.

And he returned the favor, sometimes waking Dean with his tongue, licking along the cleft of his ass, exploring and touching, shaking Dean apart, before fucking him slow and gentle on his belly. Other times, they'd barely make it to their room, Cas pulling Dean's shorts down and bending him over the dresser, prepping him roughly and fucking him like both their lives depended on it.

But sex wasn't all they did. They spent hours on the beach and in the surf. They rode all the rides at the Inlet. They went to the Haunted House and drove down to Chincoteague to see the horses, went
dancing at several of the clubs, entered Dean's baby in the OC Classic Car Show, drove up to Dover,
Delaware to gamble at the racetrack and see the planes at Dover Air Force base, and had ice cream at
dolles in Rehoboth.

Cas took hundreds of pictures, lying on a blanket in the sun with Dean. Close ups of smiles, pictures
of long lashes resting on freckled cheeks, tattoos covered in sand, shots of Dean staring off into the
distance, roughhousing with Sam in the surf, attempting to boogie board - he filled roll after roll of
film.

Dean was just as bad. He went through three thick sketchbooks over the course of the summer, each
one filled with images of Cas. Paging through one, he saw pictures of his own eyes, his chin, his lips,
full body drawings, just a hand here, a nose there, some in colored pencil, most in black and white,
but they were almost all of Cas. There were a few of Sam, and a beautiful one of Sam and Sarah
holding hands as they walked along the shore, but most were of him.

They were in love. And they couldn't get enough of each other.

He'd find Dean on the balcony in the early dawn sometimes, quietly strumming his mother's guitar,
and they'd sit and watch the sun rise over the ocean, not saying a word, just soaking each other in,
hands intertwined.

It was the most content he'd ever been, and he wasn't looking forward to heading back to Baltimore
and finding a job. Cas would have preferred to stay at the beach forever.

But all good things come to an end, and summer drew to a close all too soon. Cas found himself
dreading moving back. Dean's skin was golden bronze, and entirely covered in freckles, his hair
bleached out to a golden brown. Sam was also tan, with golden streaks in his hair. Cas was just as
dark. He'd miss seeing Dean out in the sun, emerging from the ocean with his skin glistening.

The night before they went home, Cas couldn't find Dean in the condo. He walked out onto the
balcony, looking out at the beach, and he spotted a lone figure sitting in one of the tall white
lifeguard chairs.

Dean was staring out at the ocean, when Cas joined him, a contemplative look on his face. He smiled
as Cas climbed the ladder, reaching out a hand to pull him up the rest of the way.

"Chilly out here. I brought a blanket." He held the fleece blanket out to Dean, who took it and
unwrapped it, draping it over their backs as Cas settled in beside him. Dean turned slightly, dropping
one arm around Cas's waist, leaning over to kiss his neck.

"Don't wanna go home," Dean murmured against Cas's neck.

"Me neither," Cas admitted, wrapping an arm around Dean.

They watched the surf play along the sand, warm under their blanket, Dean humming an old Beach
Boys song.

"If you should ever leave me, though life would still go on believe me. The world could show nothing
to me, so what good would living do me? God only knows what I'd be without you. God only knows
what I'd be without you," Dean sang softly under his breath, nuzzling into Cas's neck.

"It's late. We should go in."

"No," Dean whispered. "Not yet." His hand slipped into the waistband of Cas's shorts, "not yet."
He stroked Cas slowly, bringing him to hardness. Cas turned his head, catching Dean's lips with his own, his hand traveling down to Dean's shorts.

They kissed and stroked each other gently, then Dean was dragging him down from the chair, pulling him across the sand.

Stumbling and tripping over each other, they barely made it to the bedroom, Dean shoving the door shut behind him while trying to get Cas out of his clothes. They tumbled into the bed, more or less undressed, Dean kissing a hot trail down Cas's chest. His mouth found Cas, swallowing just the tip before taking him into his throat.

Cas groaned softly, digging his fingers into Dean's hair. "God, Dean, feel so damn good. So good for me baby," he whispered, thrusting gently into Dean's throat. He wanted to make more noise, but the walls were so thin, and Sam had told them on more than one occasion that he'd been permanently damaged by them.

Dean hummed around his cock, and he forgot about Sam. Fingers circled his entrance, and he had no idea where Dean had found the lube, but he was sliding inside, scissoring his fingers as he prepped him, mouth still moving up and down.

"Oh god, Dean, please," Cas whimpered.

He pulled off, and crawled up Cas's body, eyes hooded. "What do you want baby? Want me to fuck you?"

Cas nodded.

"Gotta be quiet, baby, can you do that for me?"

"Yes, anything, anything," Cas babbled.

Dean smiled, lifting Cas's right leg over his shoulder before sliding in smoothly. He wrapped his other leg tight around Dean's waist.

They made love, slow and gentle, Dean taking his time, covering Cas with kisses until the both fell over the edge, collapsing onto each other.

Dean fell asleep on his chest, but Cas lay awake for long time, holding Dean and whispering *I love you* into his hair, content and happy, drifting off to sleep with a smile on his face.
Cas woke to fingers trailing along his back, and sweet kisses following the soft touches. His room was full of sunlight, as he rolled over to find Dean smiling down at him.

"Good morning, angel," he murmured as he leaned in to kiss him. Cas reached up, running his fingers through Dean's mussed up hair.

"Morning. What time is it?"

"After nine. I just got a phone call - from Dick Roman."

"Oh yeah?" Cas asked, sitting up in bed and stretching. Dean settled next to him, leaning back in the mound of pillows on their bed.

"Yeah. He loves the angels, but says there's blank spot in his lobby. He commissioned one more angel from me."

"Which one? All the archangels are done." He reached for Dean's hand, weaving their fingers together and rubbing his thumb across Dean's.

"Azrael. The angel of death."

"Wow."

"Yeah, and Cas, get this - he offered me $75,000 for it. For one friggin' angel."

"That's incredible!"

"Yup."

"You're going to get rich off the angels, Dean. My gorgeous, successful artist boyfriend." He stretched, catching Dean's bottom lip in his teeth. Dean responded beautifully, mouth opening to suck Cas's tongue in. As usual, it didn't take long for things to combust between them, and Cas found himself flat on his back, Dean's lips soft as he teased him with feathery kisses over the head of his dick.

He wrapped his fingers in Dean's hair, reveling in how he'd let it grow out a bit over the summer. The strands were just long enough to really wrap his fingers in, deliciously fine and silky, bleached almost blonde by the sun and saltwater.

"I love your hair right now," Cas growled, pulling on it a bit.

"Meant to get it cut," Dean gasped, "kinda glad I didn't."

"Oh? Like when I do this?" Cas pulled again, and Dean groaned as he swallowed Cas down. "Hmm, did we discover a new little kink here, baby?" He wrapped both hands in Dean's hair, pulling and directing his head, moving Dean up and down on his dick. "That's it baby. That's it."

Dean hummed around him, sucking hard, gently dragging his teeth along the sensitive skin. He pressed his tongue against the vein, pressing hard as he slid upwards, twisting the tip through the slit before swallowing him down again. Cas yanked on his hair, and Dean moaned.
He pulled off long enough to whisper, "fuck my mouth, Cas, c'mon," and then let his neck go lax.

Cas grabbed two handfuls of hair, pulling Dean's head up and slamming it down again. He could feel Dean's throat fluttering around his dick, and his orgasm building as he worked Dean's head up and down, controlling the thrusts with his hands wrapped in Dean's hair.

Dean had his hands spread across Cas's thighs, holding on tight, moving his hips in the sheets, searching for any kind of friction he could get. Little hums and groans vibrated in his throat, sending sharp spikes of pleasure through Cas's flesh. He was getting painfully close. Heat built in his belly, spreading out along his spine. He pulled Dean up, completely off of him.

"What's wrong? You were close, I could feel it," Dean rasped.

"I don't want to go like this. I want to fuck you."

Dean grinned brilliantly. "You got it. How'd you want me?"

"Mmm, hands and knees."

He grinned again, crawling up the bed to get to the nightstand, tossing the lube back behind him. Cas watched him move, enjoying the play of muscles under his skin, and the way the wing tattoo rippled with every movement. He felt an incredible surge of desire, wanted to run his tongue along every feather, drag his teeth along his lover's spine.

If Dean had half an idea of how beautiful he was to Cas in that very moment, how beautiful he always was, he'd have turned bright red and hidden under the blanket, but Cas didn't care. He was beautiful. Dean was glorious, glowing like the grace of the angels he painted.

Overwhelmed, Cas grabbed Dean's hips, pulling him back. He spread his cheeks and licked a stripe across Dean's entrance.

Caught off guard, Dean moaned loudly, pushing his ass back into Cas's face. "Oh, Cas, C-as!" Dean stuttered, head falling forward into the pillow. Cas pointed his tongue, pushing it inside, adding a finger alongside, stretching Dean, soaking up the whines, whimpers, and curses flowing from Dean's mouth.

He fucked his tongue in and out, faster and faster, until Dean was practically sobbing, one long unbroken strand of please please please tumbling from him, voice faint with pleasure.

Cas added another finger, two working in tandem with his tongue. Dean had collapsed into the bed, perfect ass up in the air while he whined into the pillow. Pulling his face away, Cas added the third finger, stretching and scissoring, while Dean whimpered, hands twisted in the sheets.

"Grab onto the headboard," Cas growled, and Dean complied, arms a little shaky as he reached for the wrought iron frame.

Smoothing lube over himself, and some inside of Dean, Cas grabbed Dean's hips and pushed inside in one smooth motion. Dean keened, back arching. Cas wrapped his arm around Dean's waist, pulling him off the headboard and back against his chest, Dean hooking his feet on Cas's calves.

Grabbing a handful of hair, he tilted Dean's head back, biting down on his neck, sucking the skin there into his mouth, pulling blood to the surface. His thrusts were hard and unmerciful, slamming into Dean with everything in him.

It wasn't usually like this, they weren't usually so rough, but sometimes, sometimes this is how it
went for them. Punishing, claiming, marking each other.

Dean was gasping, crying out, whimpering, making the most incredible sounds. Cas pushed him back down, pushed Dean's head into the mattress, turning his face out with the grip on his hair. The fingers of his other hand dug into Dean's hip, gripping tight, and he was sure there'd be bruises there later.

Howling, Dean pushed back into Cas's violent thrusts, the roll of his hips matching the rhythm. Cas slammed into him, over and over again, head brushing over his prostate with every move, and Dean's back arched, fingers tearing at the sheets as he cried out Cas's name and came, hard, no hand on him.

He collapsed into the bed, muscles giving out as Cas thrust thrice more, coming just as hard, his body giving out and collapsing onto Dean's back.

They lay there for a time, Dean completely unmoving, until Cas pulled out with grimace, sliding his arm off the bed and grabbing the first thing he found, a tee shirt, and he playfully shoved Dean out of the way, swiping at the mess under him and on his chest. Dean's eyes were closed, a pleasant expression of contentment on his face, and he rolled over to lay across Cas's body.

They lay in bed for a long time after, Dean sprawled across Cas. He carded his fingers through his hair, soaking in the closeness and the way Dean felt as his chest rose and fell with his contented, slow breaths.

"I love you," Cas whispered softly, kissing the top of his head.

Dean tilted his head up for a real kiss, then settled back on the pillow next to him, a soft smile on his lips. Cas cupped his chin and pulled him close, and they traded gentle slow kisses.

Sunlight streamed through the window, a promise of another hot Baltimore day on the way, the ceiling fan spinning lazily above them.

This was peace. This was serenity. This was everything he wanted, for the rest of his life. At almost twenty-two, Castiel had found what he wanted. He was ready to settle down with the man in his arms. He loved Dean and he didn't want to look for anyone else.

"I could spend the rest of my life with you, right here in this bed, you know that?"

Dean blinked. His face was inches from Cas's, so close he could feel every breath against his lips.

"Really?"

"Yes. Are you that surprised?"

"I don't - I don't know."

Cas closed the distance, peppering Dean's face with kisses. "Surely you've noticed how happy I am, right? It's been almost a year, after all."

"Yeah…"

Heads on the same pillow, they shared the air between them, and Cas could see things moving behind Dean's green eyes. He was thinking about something, and Cas could almost see the wheels turning as Dean organized his thoughts, put them in order.

They kissed off and on for a bit, then laid still, soaking in the quiet.
Sam wasn't home, Cas realized, or Dean wouldn't have been quite so vocal during their lovemaking. They had the morning to themselves, and he was quite content to lay in bed all day if that's what Dean wanted. His eyes drifted shut, sleepy and peaceful, Dean's arm warm on his hip.

"I want to paint you," Dean said abruptly. "I want to use you as the model for Azrael."

"Ok."

"Are you sure?"

"Mnhmm. Why wouldn't I be?" Cas opened his eyes to find Dean staring at him.

He blushed bright pink. "I dunno, I just...I thought you might not want to."

"I'd love to."

The matter settled, he snuggled into Dean's side and closed his eyes, fully intended to go back to sleep.

"Cas?"

"Yes, Dean?"

"I um..."

He opened his eyes again, just to find Dean looking at the ceiling, consternation on his face. "What's wrong?"

"I was kinda thinking, you know, you're having trouble finding a job, and you want to write…"

"Yeah?"

"And Roman's willing to pay me $75k for this angel painting, and you could just...you could just…"

"What?" Cas propped himself up on one elbow, looking down into Dean's eyes. "What are you trying to say?"

"Well, you could stay home and write, and just - just work for Frank. Because I can support us now, and you don't have to...I mean, if you didn't...fuck." Dean slapped a hand over his eyes and groaned.

"Why do I get the feeling you're trying to ask me something bigger than just letting you support me while I write?"

"'cause I kinda am, but I'm just not…" he trailed off and groaned again.

Cas couldn't help but chuckle. "It's ok. I think I know what you're up to, and you just need time, and I'm willing to wait. Just...when you are ready, you have to know that I'd say yes, Dean. I would."

The hand slid off his face and green eyes sparkled up at him. "Really?" Dean breathed.

"Really."

Now

Dean opened the door to an unruly mass of pine needles and a very large man trying to shove the thing through the door.
"Sammy? What the hell, man?!"

Sam gave the pine a mighty shove and Dean ducked out of the way to avoid the incoming needle rocket as the tree shot through the opening of the door and landed in the firehouse. Sam grinned at him, cheeks red under a lurid orange scarf and knit hat. "I brought you a tree!" he said gleefully, then reached down for a duffel bag and tossed that in as well.

Dean eyed the duffel, eyebrow raised. "You moving in?"

"Well, my vacation started today, you know, the one I took for the wedding? Anyway, I figured I'd just spend it up here with you!" Sam kicked the bag across the floor as he came in, turning and shutting the door behind him.

"Who said I wanted company?"

"Well, not you, that's for damn sure. I let you do things your way, you'd pretty much sulk until it was time to go back to work. Am I right?"

"Dammit, Sammy…"

"C'mon, help me get this thing upstairs!" Sam grabbed the trunk of the tree, pulling it towards the stairwell, huffs and thuds echoing in the firehouse as he attempted to drag the thing up the steps. Against his better judgment, Dean went to help him.

"I don't see why you brought a tree, though," Dean grumbled, shoving at the thing.

Sam looked down the stairs at him, eyebrows arched so high they were almost in his hair. "Uh, duh, it's Christmas!"

"So?"

"So you need a tree!"

Dean sighed and shoved the tree up the stairs as hard as he could, successfully pushing tree and little brother out of the stairwell, enjoying the sound of Sam's grunt as his ass tumbled through the doorway.

He wasn't taking any satisfaction in knocking his brother over. Well, he wasn't taking much...oh hell, it was very satisfying to walk the rest of the way up and find Sam sprawled on the floor under the pine.

Snorting, Dean walked past him, ignoring Sam's request for help. "Serves you right, Sasquatch! I didn't need a tree, and I sure as hell don't need a babysitter!"

Sam pulled himself to his feet and brushed his jeans off. "Well, maybe I do. What's the point of spending Christmas alone, when we've got each other?" Sam's face clouded. "Unless you really don't want me here."

Dean dropped into the couch. "Nah, I don't care. Might as well stay, you're here now." He watched Sam's face light up with a big grin.

"Great!" He dragged the tree over to a spot in front of the windows, then disappeared into the bathroom. He came back a minute later with a large box in his hands. "I can't believe all our ornaments and crap are still in the locker in there! I won't have to go get anything!"
Sam set the box down, then went back, reemerging a minute later with the tree stand and entirely too much enthusiasm for Dean's taste.

"I'm not helping you." Dean got back up and stalked over towards the fridge.

"Fine. I got this," Sam told him easily.

Over the next fifteen minutes, as Dean scanned his cabinets for staples, dismayed to see that he literally had nothing, Sam grunted and huffed in the background, trying to manhandle the tree into the stand.

Dean made a grocery list, smiling slightly as Sam cursed under his breath. His brother was losing the war against the Christmas tree. Every time he got the trunk aligned with the stand, he'd miss and the stand would shoot across the floor.

He hid a chuckle in a stuttered cough, but Sam caught it, and turned around to glare at him. "You could help, y'know?" he huffed.

"Nope. Your tree, your problem. But, if you were to lay the tree down, might be easier to get the stand on that way, instead of trying to drop the trunk into the stand."

"Huh." Sam stared down at the tree. "That might work."

"That will work, that's how I did it. And hurry up, I need to go to the store and if your ass wants any green shit, you need to come with."

"Ok." Sam picked the stand up and wrestled with it for a few more minutes while Dean finished his grocery list.

"There!" Sam yelled triumphantly, setting the tree up, now secured in it's stand. "That worked!"

Dean regarded the tree critically. "It's crooked."

"Well it can stay crooked!" Sam laughed, "I'm done!"

"Swell. Groceries. Let's go."

"Fine, ok, let me go piss first, jesus."

Walking over to the box on the couch, Dean slapped the lid off irritably. Most of the ornaments were wrapped in paper, but of course, right on top was the stupid angel tree topper he'd made for that first Christmas.

He stared at it for a minute, brain flashing back to Cas grinning at him as he stood on the piano to put it on top of the tree.

Hard to believe he'd actually been that happy once upon a time.

Dean dropped it back in the box as Sam stomped out of the bathroom, reaching for the coat he'd left slung over one of the recliners.

"Ready?"

"Yeah, I'm ready."

They shut off the lights and headed down the stairs, Sam texting away on his phone. "Where are we
"Whole Foods over by Jones Falls. You can get your salad crap and we can have lunch there too."
"Sounds good. We can get the stuff to make Christmas cookies, too, right?"
"Sure, Sammy," Dean said, softening a bit at his brother's enthusiasm. He even let Sam tune the radio to WLIF with their Commercial-Free Christmas program, and Eartha Kitt purred *Santa Baby* over the Impala's speakers.

Dean was in a pretty good mood when he pulled the car into the Whole Foods parking lot, humming along to *Jingle Bell Rock* and tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He handed Sam the produce list and went off in search of the other items. Dean picked up flour, sugar, butter, vanilla, steaks, ground beef, and other items, filling his cart with his choices. He wandered back towards the front, hoping Sam was pretty much done, because he was starting to get hungry.

It was pretty easy to find him, what with him being seven feet tall, and he was talking to a dark haired man. The man turned, blue eyes met his, and Dean was sure his heart stopped working for a moment.

Cas.

Cas got up early that morning, determined not to spend the whole day vegging in the hotel room. He showered, dressed warmly, and drove his rental Prius to Fells Point. He had breakfast at Jimmy's, then wandered the streets, walking along Broadway and Thames, popping into little storefronts along the way.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out.

-Out with Dean. Shopping. Wanna drop in?

Cas frowned. He still wasn't sure Sam's plan was such a great idea.

Sam had called the night before. He told Cas he planned on spending his Christmas vacation with Dean, and would text Cas to let them know where they were. Basically, he was setting it up for Cas to simply 'run into' Dean, to make it look like an innocent coincidence. Cas still wasn't sure how he felt about it. However, he found himself texting Sam back, asking for their location.

-Whole Foods, off of Falls Road. Know where it is?
-Yes. Be there as soon as possible, Cas texted back.

He practically ran back to the Prius, but made himself sit in the driver's seat for a moment, taking deep breaths and forcing himself to calm down. He would make himself wait, give Sam and Dean a ten minute head start to get to the store and begin their shopping. Otherwise, it wouldn't look like an accident.

Castiel lasted five minutes.

He pulled the car out onto Broadway, making a left onto Eastern Avenue. The trip up 83 didn't take nearly long enough, and he was still very keyed up by the time he pulled into the lot.

Of course, the only open spot was the one next to the Impala.

Cas sat in the car for a few minutes, trying to calm his racing heart and reason with his disapproving
conscience. Finally, he shut off the car and pulled himself from the Prius, walking towards the store with equal parts dread and excitement.

Sam was standing just inside the door, weighing a bunch of grapes. He slid them into a plastic bag and dropped them into his cart. Dean didn't appear to be anywhere in the vicinity, but Sam's face lit up as he looked up and saw Cas standing there.

"Hey!" he called. "You made it."

"Yes," Cas looked around, "where's Dean?"

"Getting the other stuff on our list. He'll be back."

"Are you sure this is a good idea? He's going to figure it out, and he'll be angry."

Sam's expression darkened for a moment, then cleared just as quickly. "He won't figure it out. Once you guys are good again, we can tell him then, and he'll probably laugh. I'm doing this for his own good, you know?"

"I know, Sam, I know that's how you see it, but I'm just concerned. It feels like manipulation. It makes me...uneasy." Cas reached down and picked up a pear, tossing it lightly from hand to hand.

"It will be ok. You just need to trust me. Ok? Just trust me."

"I just don't. -" Cas stopped mid-thought, watching as Sam's eyes fixed on a point just behind him. He turned slowly to find Dean frozen near the oranges, eyes wide and terrified.

Cas smiled, in what he hoped was a reassuring manner, and Dean stumbled back a step, crashing into the orange display and sending the citrus tumbling all over the floor.

His cheeks flamed bright red, and he heard Sam mutter a curse behind him. They both made their way to where Dean was still frozen to the spot. Sam started picking up oranges, doing his best to fix the display with the help of a harried looking store clerk.

"Hello, Dean," Cas said quietly.

Dean's eyes were wild, and Cas was dismayed to see the look of fear on his face. He looked around, head on a swivel as he looked for an exit, his mannerisms that of a trapped animal.

"How are you?" Cas asked him, as Sam continued scrambling for oranges.

"Uh, I'm um, I'm - I'm good," Dean stammered.

"That's - that's good," Cas said weakly.

They stared at each, neither one knowing what to say or what to do.

Sam straightened back up, sticking the last orange on the pile. "Ok, that's done. You got everything?" he asked Dean. His brother didn't answer, eyes locked on Cas's. "Dean?"

"Huh? Yeah?" Dean looked totally flustered, turning to look at Sam, eyes sliding back towards Cas. He couldn't seem to decide where to look.

"I asked if you got everything. I've got all the produce."

"Oh. Ok. Yeah, I'm um, I'm done."
"We should get lunch."

"Yeah…"

Cas smiled as Dean looked back at him, inwardly flinching at the lost expression on Dean's face. He was squirming, completely uncomfortable.

Sam was wrong. This was a very, very bad idea, and he was going to bow out before it got worse, or Dean got any more miserable.

"I'm just picking up some lunch for myself. It was nice seeing you, Sam, and Dean." Cas moved to walk away, but Sam's hand shot out, wrapping around his upper arm.

"Have lunch with us!" Sam enthused, "We're just gonna eat at the hot bar here. Join us."

Dean's eyes widened comically, staring at Sam like he'd grown a third head. Cas would have laughed if it hadn't been so perfectly clear that Dean was freaking out.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Sam," Cas said quietly, watching Dean's expression.

His cheeks reddened again as he looked down at the floor.

"Oh. Ok. Maybe next time then." Sam looked disappointed, but reached out to shake Cas's hand. "It was good to see you again, man."

"You too, Sam."

"S'ok," Dean muttered. "You can stay and eat. Free country, you know?"

Sam looked as surprised as Cas felt. "You sure?"

"Yeah." He took the produce from Sam's cart and added it to his. "I don't care." Dean turned his cart in the aisle, heading back towards the food bar.

"Wow," Sam murmured, "that's progress."

"This is a bad idea. He's uncomfortable, and unhappy, and I don't want to push him. This isn't fair to him," Cas hissed.

"If he didn't want it, he would have said so," he countered, "and it's just lunch. Just lunch, Cas."

"I'm telling you right now, I'm not going to force this on him. He's walking wounded, can't you see that, Sam?"

Sam looked at him, a shrewd look on his face that Cas didn't like at all. "No, actually, I didn't see it. Not really. But you did. Because twelve years later, you still know him better than anyone. That's what I see."

"Dammit, Sam…"

"Just lunch, Cas. C'mon." Sam left him standing in the produce department, watching as he and Dean perused the hot bar.

Dean looked up, looked back at him, and something almost like a smile tilted his lips. He blushed again and looked away, back down at the food, but the move had been made just the same.
Maybe -

Maybe Sam was right. Maybe this could work.

And if he was being honest with himself, Cas wanted it to work. Wanted it more than anything.

Dean was quiet while they selected and purchased their food, and quiet throughout the meal, but Sam talked enough for all three of them.

When they were done, Cas chatted with Sam while Dean paid for their groceries, then he helped load them in the Impala.

"So it was good to see you again," he smiled at Dean.

"Yeah, Cas, it was," he said softly. Dean gave him another crooked half smile, then slid gracefully into the driver's seat, starting the Impala. Sam grinned and tossed him a thumbs up over the roof before getting in himself.

Cas watched them pull away, a tiny shard of hope growing in his chest.

So far, so good.
Little Lines and Cracks

Chapter Notes

This chapter has a few warnings for some serious homophobic language, and some emotional abuse. Things are going to start getting unpleasant. You’re not going to like me after this chapter, and you’re going to HATE me for the next two. Just remember, I promise a happy ending and it’s always darkest before the dawn. LOVE AND HUGS!

It really couldn’t be going better, actually, Sam thought, as he pushed a red cart through the White Marsh Target. It was so easy, and Dean was none the wiser. A simple text message, and Cas would appear, Dean would get all flustered and blush-y, then inevitably agree that Cas should join them for whatever they were doing.

Sam felt incredibly smug, and he was finding it harder and harder to keep the grin off his face every time he and Dean were out and Cas mysteriously ran into them. He hoped Dean hadn’t noticed how much more he was texting these days, or that he sent a flurry of messages every time they’d gone out in the last few days, but he was pretty sure his brother remained oblivious.

After the fairly successful lunch at Whole Foods, they’d ‘run into’ Cas at Broadway Market, and shared a plate of crab cakes. Next, it had been wings and drinks at a pub near Ravens Stadium. Dean had looked up in shock when the dark haired man entered the pub, but adjusted quickly. It had even been worth enduring Gabriel’s ridiculous flirting, something Sam had been dealing with since he was a teenager.

Sometimes he wondered if maybe Gabe was serious, and was actually flirting with him, rather than just play flirting. It’s not like he’d be against it or anything. Sam didn’t consider himself gay or straight, or anything, really, and Gabe was a nice guy, and had always been nice to him...not that that was the current issue.

No, the current issue was getting Dean to wake up enough to realize that he was enjoying these ‘random’ encounters with Cas and go on an actual date or something. Something other than this circling around each other staring holes through each other's faces bullshit they were currently doing.

"Small world, huh?" Cas asked genially, adding a can of shaving cream to his basket.

"Yeah," Dean mumbled, shifting his weight back and forth. "Baltimore's not exactly a small town."

"Well, you know, Cas probably just needed stuff. This Target's close to 95. Makes sense to me," Sam said airily. Dean gave him a very strange look, reaching out for his own can of shaving cream.

"Right…"

"Anyway, Cas, we were just about to get lunch. Join us?"

Dean’s head spun, whipping around towards Sam, green eyes wide. "Uh, didn't we have...other things, I mean, I haven't gotten anything for Jo, and shopping and shit…” Dean fumbled with his handwritten list.
"Oh, well, it's ok. Maybe I'll see you later?" Cas smiled at Dean, doing his best to be reassuring, but it wasn't working, and if Dean hadn't looked so flustered and off balance, Sam would have totally laughed at him. As it was, he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling, as Dean flailed his arms, and stumbled over his words.

"Yeah. Yeah, later, later is good, and we should, we should go." Dean practically tripped on his own feet getting out of the aisle, Sam grabbing the cart.

"Panera Bread," Sam whispered, "twenty minutes." He didn't wait for Cas's answer, just pushed the cart out into the main aisle, scanning the crowd of Christmas shoppers for his brother. Dean had walked far down the aisle, and Sam saw him disappear into another one, and he quickly followed his brother.

Dean was pacing back and forth in front of a display of mixers and blenders, a panicked look on his face. "I swear he's stalking me!" he exclaimed with wide eyes. "Sammy, it's like he knows. Like he knows where I am, what I'm doing, I can't figure out how he's doing it, but it's making me crazy! I'm getting to where I don't even want to leave the firehouse!" He ran a hand through his hair. "That's why I said White Marsh. I thought, way out here in the county, I'd be safe. 'Cause why would he do anything out of the city? But nope, here he is! What the hell?"

Sam felt a twinge of guilt, watching Dean skulk around the aisle and mutter to himself.

"Maybe we should just go get lunch?" Lunch would help. Dean didn't get nearly as nervous when Cas showed up while they were eating.

"Yeah, here," he handed Sam his wallet, "pay for my shit, I need some air. A lot of air."

Dean disappeared back down the aisle, leaving Sam staring after him.

"I still think this is a bad idea." Sam startled as Cas walked up behind him. "Every time I do this, he's so twitchy and jumpy, I don't know how you expect him to relax."

"Well, it seems like food is the trick. When we're eating he's not acting like he wants to run, so join us for lunch. I'm going to check out now, give me like twenty minutes. Ok?"

A storm cloud passed over Cas's face and it was clear he wanted to argue with Sam, but Sam also knew he wanted to spend time with Dean, and he watched Cas bury his misgivings.

"Fine. Twenty minutes."

"Sounds like a plan," Sam smiled and pushed his cart out into the the aisle, leaving Cas behind.

Everything was going beautifully, and it was only a matter of time until Dean realized he actually did want to spend time with Cas, and Sam wouldn't have to play the middleman anymore.

And twenty minutes later, as he sat in a booth at Panera Bread with Dean, watching his brother's eyes widen as Cas joined the line of folks ordering their meals, Sam figured it must be working, his plan must be coming together, because Dean stood, with a real smile on his face, and beckoned Cas to join them.

Cas slid into the booth next to Dean, smiling over at him, and Sam could practically see the wheels turning, and he knew, this was it, he'd done it, and now it was only a matter of time. He took another bite of his salad, mentally patting himself on the back.

Sam Winchester, matchmaker extraordinaire.
"Just put this on, and let me take pictures."

"It doesn't fit. It's too big."

"Please, Cas, just put it on. There's a certain look I'm going for. Trust me?"

His boyfriend glared disdainfully at the lump of tan fabric. "Why a trenchcoat?" he grumbled, pulling it on reluctantly.

"Because I want Azrael to be an everyday dude. Like super normal Joe off to work in his suit and trench coat. Like holy tax accountant guy." Dean reached for the blue tie around Cas's neck, adjusting it so that it was slightly rumpled and backwards. "Just trust me, please?"

Cas smiled, blue eyes twinkling. "I trust you, my eccentric little artist."

The outfit in place, Dean stepped back, reaching for the Polaroid camera he'd left on the piano. He found Cas in the viewfinder, and started snapping off pictures, pulling each one from the camera and laying them neatly on the closed lid of the piano. Dean took seven total full body shots, all of them at different angles. He then moved in closer, and took four of Cas's face, capturing the angry, smite-y scowl he'd asked Cas for.

"You look incredible," Dean breathed, staring into Cas's eyes, camera set aside. "Like a real angel. I think you could probably smite me if you wanted to."

Cas stepped forward, and Dean felt an odd urge to step back and away from him, so powerful was the gaze on Cas's face. He raised his hand, and rested the palm against Dean's forehead.

"This is all it would take? To smite you?" His gravelly voice had dropped impossibly lower, and Dean's whole body reacted, blood rushing southward at an alarmingly fast rate, his heart pounding against his ribcage. He wondered if Cas had any idea how hot he was like that. "Imagine if I had grace. You'd be a smoking crater now, wouldn't you?"

Dean's mouth went dry, and Cas's hand felt like fire where it was still resting on his head. "Uh-uh, y-yeah," he stuttered. Smooth, Winchester, he groused to himself.

Cas didn't seem to mind, his other hand grabbing Dean's hip and pulling him closer. "Would you swear fealty to me, Dean? If I were an angel, would you serve me, without complaint, would you obey my every command? Would you go to your knees in front of me?" Cas's hand slipped from his forehead, coming to rest against the back of his neck. The hold was lose, just like the one on his hip, but it was the unspoken promise of Cas's strength that held him still.

A bead of sweat rolled down Dean's spine, as he remained completely motionless in Cas's grip.

"Would you worship me, Dean?"

Dean nodded. His voice had abandoned him.

"Then to your knees, beautiful, and worship me." The hand on his neck moved to his shoulder, pushing Dean downward, and he went willingly, fingers scrabbling at the fly of the suit he'd put Cas in.

"That's it, baby, worship me with your perfect mouth," Cas's fingers scratched through his still over-
long hair, and the feel of his fingernails turned Dean on even more. Dean looked up at Cas, and found that beautiful blue gaze staring back down at him as he freed him from the suit pants, letting them slip to the floor.

Cas cupped his chin, thumb rubbing over his lips. "So perfect, so beautiful. I love you, love you so much baby," he murmured.

A while later, both of them sated and satisfied, parts of the suit lay spread all over the living room, and Cas and Dean were tangled together on the couch, the trenchcoat covering them from the waist down. Dean was sprawled across Cas, his head resting on Cas's shoulder. His fingers were tracing patterns across the plains of Cas's chest.

"I love moments like this," Cas said softly, nose buried in Dean's hair. "Just you and me, and the quiet. I love it."

"Mmm, me too."

Dean's stomach growled, and Cas giggled softly. "Perhaps we should feed you?"

"Yeah, probably couldn't hurt. Roadhouse?"

"Absolutely. But shower first."

"Ok," Dean said, pulling himself off the couch, "I'll go start the water."

"I've been thinking," Cas said softly.

"Yeah?"

"I want another tattoo."

"Oh, ok. What did you want to get done?" Dean asked, as he walked into the bathroom. He started the water, and Cas joined him a moment later, wrapping his arms around his waist.

"I want you to write out your name in Enochian. That's what I want."

Dean turned in Cas's arms, eyes wide. "You want to put my name on you? Like, permanently?"

"Yes."

"Dude…"

"What?"

"That's just, that's pretty big, Cas. You're talking about, y'know, putting me on your skin. Forever."

"Haven't you figured out that I'm planning on forever?"

A strange feeling settled in Dean's chest. He didn't think he liked it. It felt like fear.

He was ready for this, wasn't he? Forever? Hell, he'd been thinking about it. He was the one that suggested Cas should let him support him so he could concentrate on writing. But forever?

An odd coldness sunk into his chest, and he felt uncomfortably out of breath.

"Hey. Dean? Where did you go baby?" Cas's eyes were big and concerned.
"Yeah, I'm good. I'm good. Shower, and then food, right?"

"Right," Cas said slowly, obviously still concerned.

Dean ignored the concern, pulling Cas into the spray and pressing a bottle of shampoo into his hands. He ducked his head into the spray, pushing down the doubts that had sprung up, seemingly out of nowhere.

Cas was perfect. Cas was wonderful and loving and everything Dean had ever wanted. So what, exactly, was his problem? The problem wasn't with Cas, that was for sure.

They finished their shower, and got dressed, neither one of them talking. Cas was watching him, eyes sharp and focused, but Dean plastered on his best smile, and by the time they took seats in their regular booth at the Roadhouse, Dean was sure Cas had forgotten his moment of weakness.

Sam sidled up to them with a smile, setting glasses of water on the table for them, and took their orders while Dean pulled out a sketch pad, pencil moving quickly over the paper as he sketched several symbols.

"Just my name?" he asked, pencil poised over the paper.

"Yup." Cas sipped his water. "Are you sure you're ok with this?"

"Yes. Look," Dean turned the paper to show Cas the row of symbols he'd just drawn. "That one's for me. C-a-s-t-i-e-l."

Cas smiled, "you're getting it done, too?"

"Yeah. You ok with that?"

"Absolutely."

Sam came by with their food, a big bacon burger and fries for Dean, and a BLT and fruit salad for Cas. He set his own Cobb salad down next to Cas and slid into the booth with them.

"Break time!" he announced happily, raising an eyebrow in the direction of Dean's sketch pad.

"What's that?"

"Cas and I are getting our names tattooed."

"What do you think?" Cas asked, turning the pad so Sam could see it.

"Looks cool," he smiled, "you guys are so cute," he fluttered his eyelashes at Dean.

"Shuddup, bitch," Dean grumbled, feeling his cheeks heat.

"Jerk. I like it. You guys are awesome." He dug into his salad with gusto, stuffing his mouth with romaine.

Dean sighed, and dug into his burger. Cas was good for him. He loved Cas. He had planned on asking Cas to make things permanent anyway. So why was he panicking now? It didn't make sense.

"Figured I'd find you losers here," a deep voice said, dropping into the booth next to him.

Dean looked up, into the eyes of an extremely exhausted looking Victor Henriksen.
"Vic! Hey, how you doin' man?" Dean asked.

Vic sighed heavily, scrubbing at his eyes with his hand. "Not so great, dude. Been a rough week."

"How so?" Cas asked.

"Just, my relationship's falling apart. Guess it's better I found out now, instead of after we got married. I can't keep her happy. That woman's tastes are too rich for my blood."

"Wait, you're breaking up with Bela?"

"Yeah, guess she's done with me."

"Man, that sucks, Vic. Want me to get you something to eat?"

"Nah, Sam, just an iced tea, please."

"Sure." Sam stood, gathering his salad plate and Cas's empty plate as well. "Be right back."

"Is there anything we can do?" Cas asked softly.

"Nah, she moved out. For the best, I guess. Man, you think you've found the relationship, your endgame, and it all blows up in your face." Vic stole a fry off Dean's plate. "Guess we can't all have what you two have."

Cas smiled, and patted Vic's arm. "It will be ok. We'll help any way we can, right Dean?"

"Right," Dean said woodenly, thoughts in turmoil.

Endgame. Permanency. Was that something he and Cas had? Really? Or was he like Vic, waiting for the other shoe to drop?

Vic and Cas continued talking, discussing plans and Vic's future, but Dean had tuned them out, lost to his own internal battle, fear pushing at the happiness in his core.

What would happen, once Cas got bored with him? How would he handle it? Would he be able to go back to girls, or would he need to find another guy? Would anyone ever make him happy like Cas did?

In the course of one afternoon, everything Dean had been counting on for his future seemed to be unraveling before his eyes. Cas was going to get tired of him and leave. He was sure of it.

Then Cas turned, caught his eyes, and the love in his expression was so strong, so pure, and Dean felt like an idiot.

Cas loved him. Cas loved him, and he loved Cas, and they were happy.

They were happy.

That would have to be enough.

Dean broke ground on the Azrael painting, and Victor spent the weekend with them, getting drunk and whining about Bela. Castiel was concerned that Victor's unhappiness was getting to Dean. His boyfriend seemed largely unsettled by Vic's presence, watching his friend with wary eyes.
Saturday, they got up early, and Cas laid patiently in a chair in Pam's shop as Dean painstakingly tattooed the Enochian letters on his chest, just above his heart. Cas then had Dean add the anti-possession symbol underneath.

Afterwards, he held Dean's hand while Pam inked the letters of his own name on Dean's arm, just below the red handprint.

"That looks pretty fuckin' good," Pam said pleasantly, wiping Dean's arm down and covering the tattoo. "Almost like you two morons are married. I like it."

"Me too," Cas said happily, admiring his new ink in the mirror.

"Now put your shirts on, before I get jealous!" She winked, and left them in the back room.

Dean was staring at the tattoo in the mirror, eyes dark.

"You ok?" Cas asked him, and Dean started slightly.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm good." Dean slid his shirt on, gathering his things. "I'm heading back. Gotta get some work done on Azrael."

"Dean?"

"Yeah?" Dean froze in the doorway.

"Are you ok? You seem...upset. Did I do something wrong?"

Dean sighed. "No, I'm good. I am. I swear."

"You'd tell me if something was wrong, right?"

"Yeah, Cas, I would." He disappeared through the doorway, and Cas felt something like dread settling in his heart. Something was wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was wrong.

Dean didn't wait for him, but had paid Pam, and when Cas made it back to the firehouse, the doors were thrown wide and Dean had his shirt off again, up on the scaffolding and deeply immersed in the painting, AC/DC blasting loudly through the studio.

Cas sighed, and watched Dean paint for a while, then left the firehouse again.

Pushing the door to Benny's open, Cas shoved his way inside, plopping down on the first stool he came to. Benny was wiping the bar down, but caught Cas's eyes.

"What'll it be kiddo?"

"Beer - no, tequila. Bring me some tequila."

Benny raised a questioning eyebrow, but brought the bottle and a shot glass over. "Trouble in paradise?" he asked, pouring the shot.

"You tell me," Cas grumbled. He slammed back the booze, and plunked the glass down again. "More."

"What's gotten into you angel face?"
"Dean. Dean got into me. Now he's in a mood and acting all cagey and I don't know what to do."

"Talk to him, maybe?"

"He's painting."

"Oh." Benny poured another shot, pulled out a glass, and poured himself one as well. "Well, kiddo, don't know what to tell you."

"I just don't understand. A few days ago, we were talking long term, then Vic showed up with his tales of woe, and now Dean's acting all weird and freaked out. It's like he's gotten cold feet or something. I just want to fix it." He downed the shot, setting the glass down and motioning for Benny to refill it. "Why won't he talk to me? Doesn't he know I'm here for him? I'd do anything for him. And then we just went and tattooed each other's names on," he downed the third shot, reveling in the slow burn moving down his throat. "Somewhere, I've managed to fuck this up."

"Look, ain't my business, but sounds like you two idiots need to have a chat. Try that 'fore you go and work yourself up, kid." Cas looked up at Benny, and the other man smiled. "Jus' go an' talk to him, ok?"

"It's Dean, Benny. Talking isn't exactly his strong suit." Cas reached over and grabbed the bottle, pouring himself a fourth shot.

"Don't know, if you don't give him a chance," Benny said quietly, sliding the bottle under the counter.

"I wish Victor had stayed in the county," Cas said bitterly.

"Well, now, don't seem to me like Vic's the problem here. Sounds like Dean's the problem." Benny took Cas's empty glass and wiped the counter. "Go talk to him. Climb up that scaffold and sit there 'til he listens. Ok?"

Cas nodded. "Ok."

Five days since Vic showed up, sending Dean into a question everything he thought he knew phase.

Three days since the tattoo. Three days since Cas tried to talk to him. He'd brushed it off, declaring he was perfectly fine and diving back into the painting. One day since Cas demanded a reason for his distance, slamming and locking the door to his room when Dean couldn't provide one.

He hadn't slept that night, and now he was on the scaffold, painting, awake for more than twenty-four hours. His eyes hurt, his head hurt, and Dean was sure he was losing his mind.

Splashing paint across the canvas, he smeared blue down the front of Azrael's shirt, an abstract shape that he would eventually develop into the angel's tie. The Polaroids of Cas were pinned along the side of the canvas, and some of the blue paint had splashed on several of them.

The painting was pissing him off. He couldn't seem to get the effect he was going for. Nothing was coming together. Dean growled and threw his pallet down. He needed a beer. Sliding down the fire pole, he grimaced when his bare feet slammed into concrete.

This was ridiculous. What the hell was wrong with him? He yanked on the door of the old fridge in his studio, pulling out a beer and draining it in a few gulps.

"What the hell is that supposed to be?" a deep voice asked from behind him, and despite the summer
heat in the studio, a deep chill ran up his spine, as he turned to find himself eye to eye with one John Winchester.

"Dad? What're you doin' here?"

"Came to see my sons. Is that a crime?"

Dean kicked at an empty paint tube on the floor. "Last time you were here, wasn't real pleasant for me, y'know?"

"I came to see Sam. Is he here?"

"No. No, he's on a date."

"With a girl?"

Dean grimaced, "Yeah, Dad, with a girl. Sarah. She's nice." He moved away from his father, shutting off the record player and carefully sliding the record back into it's sleeve. "He'll be back later. But I don't think you'll get a real warm welcome from him. He doesn't want anything to do with you."

"And whose fault is that?" John growled.

"Yours," Dean shot back.

"No, you turned him against me."

"Are you fucking kidding me, Dad?" he scoffed, "you did that yourself. You fucking hit him! And he came to me because he knew he'd be safe here!"

John glared at him, "Watch your mouth when you talk to me, boy. And I didn't hit him that hard. Sometimes a boy needs a little discipline."

Dean shook his head and pulled his lower lip into his mouth, biting down hard, trying to get ahold of the anger pulsing through him. "Discipline. That's an interesting way of putting it."

"Yeah, well maybe I should have used a little more on you, maybe tanned your hide a few more times. Maybe then you wouldn't be so fucked up. Never thought I'd have a fag for a son."

Dean's blood turned to ice. "What are you talking about?" he whispered.

"Oh, come on, Dean, I'm not stupid. You're some frilly little artist that paints angels, and you live with another boy who's obviously not interested in girls. I can only assume you two are fucking." His eyes raked over Dean, leaving him feeling raw, exposed, his gaze settling on the tattoo of Mary on Dean's chest, an unreadable expression on his face. "At least Sam's got the decency to go out and find a pretty girl."

"Dad…"

John picked at some paint tubes on Dean's workbench, slowly moving forward, and Dean realized he'd let himself be cornered, wedged in between his father, the workbench, and the wall. He was completely penned in.

"Do you know how disappointed she'd be? How disgusted? This is not what your mother wanted for you, Dean."
A stabbing pain hit his chest. "You don't know that," he murmured, eyes downcast.

"But I do. I do know that. I was there. I held her in my arms while she held you, and whispered all her dreams for you. You painting angels and shacking up with some boy was never part of the plan."

Dean ducked his head, ashamed, his cheeks burning. He could feel tears burning in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall, refused to give his father even that much satisfaction.

"Why don't you just leave, then, if you're so disgusted by me?" he growled bitterly.

"I will. But you tell Sammy, I'll be back, and next time he better be here. Understand?"

"Yeah, Dad, I understand."

"Straighten yourself out, boy. Your mom wouldn't want this for you. At all."

He left, as suddenly as he'd come. Dean's knees gave out, and he slid down the wall, feeling even more lost than he had before.

Dean tried to focus on Cas, but all he could hear was his dad telling him how disappointed his mother would be. His beautiful, perfect mother, who loved him like no one else ever had, and he rubbed his hand over the tattoo of her, wondering if his dad was right, if she'd be disappointed with him, if she'd hate what he'd become.

John Winchester knew how to hit him where it hurt, that was for sure, the ache in Dean's chest nearly unbearable as the tears finally fell. He pulled his knees to his chest, and hid his face in the bend of his arms, his whole body shaking as he did his best to hold back the sobs.

He was a fuck up. He was a fuck up, and the whole world knew it.
Coming Back As We Are

Chapter Notes

Please try not to get too angry about the next couple of chapters. There is going to be pain as we deal with Cas and Dean's breakup in 2001, and Dean's actions may not make sense to you. Please let it play out. Everything will be explained in time. Second, I've been asked if I intend to write their reactions to the Terrorists attacks of 9-11. The answer is yes. That will be playing out in the next chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 2001

Castiel sat straight up in bed, drenched in sweat and shaking. He'd had a nightmare. A very vague nightmare, but a nightmare none the less. He fumbled for his phone on the nightstand, checking the time. It was well after two in the morning. He set it back down, and rolled over, reaching for Dean, but found nothing but empty bed.

He'd forgotten.

Dean hadn't slept in his bed the last two nights. They were fighting. Since Victor reappeared, Dean had been off, cold. And then that night. Cas had made dinner. Dean didn't eat. He'd appeared shaken at first, by what, Cas didn't know. Sam seemed at a loss as well.

He'd left for Benny's, told Cas to leave him alone, and didn't come home before Cas finally gave up and went to sleep.

Flipping the light on, Cas blinked several times as his eyes adjusted to the brightness. He swung his legs out of the bed, standing and reaching for the tee hanging off the footboard. He opened the door into the darkened living room, carefully picking his way across the floor to the bathroom.

There was an oddly muffled sound, then a low thunk, from Dean's room, but he didn't think much of it...until the low, pained groan he caught on the way back.

Dean was having a nightmare.

In an instant, Cas forgot that he was mad at him, as concern filtered through his still half-asleep conscious, and he went to Dean's door instead of his own, pushing it open and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

But there was no darkness.

A light burned on Dean's nightstand, illuminating a very naked Dean -and the blonde currently wrapped around him.

"Oh my god," Cas whispered, air rushing from his lungs.

Dean's eyes opened, and he startled, shoving the girl off of him and tumbling off the bed, pulling the bed covers with him.
"Cas! Oh, fuck, fuck."

The girl turned, and winked at him. He recognized her immediately; she was the same blonde that had pushed into Dean's personal space that night at Benny's - *Lilith*? - the same night everything changed for them. And now, here she was again, the same blonde, and again, *again*, their relationship was about to change.

Cas shook his head, tears he wasn't aware had formed flying from his skin. "No. *No no no,*" he muttered, stumbling as he tried to back out of the room.

Dean tried to stand, tried to get his feet under him, but he was obviously drunk, and he sank back to his knees again.

"Cas," he said feebly.

"If it makes you feel better," the girl sneered, getting out of bed and walking naked to where a scrap of red fabric draped over a chair, "nothing really happened. Loser's so drunk he can't even get hard." She slipped the dress on, reached down and grabbed her heels. "Bye, Dean. Call me when you're sober." She blew him a kiss, then smirked at Cas on her way out the door.

"What the hell is going on?" A sleep addled Sam stood in the doorway of his room, eyes wide with concern. "What's happening?"

Sarah appeared behind him, one of Sam's tees down to her knees.

Cas couldn't speak. Couldn't think. He stared at the man on the floor, with his unfocused green eyes, and an unbidden sob fell from his throat.

He spun on his heel, ran back to his room and slammed the door shut, locking it behind him, before tossing himself onto the bed.

Face buried in the pillow, he let the sobs overtake him, until sleep reclaimed him.

He woke the next morning to loud voices arguing, doors slamming, and Dean's angry voice rising above Sam's. Moments later, he heard, and felt, the Impala roar to life, her tires squealing on the blacktop as Dean peeled out of the firehouse.

Cas ignored the soft tap on his door, and the whispered "Cas, you awake?" He heard Sam and Sarah leave not long after.

When he was sure the firehouse was empty, he dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. As the water beat down on his neck and shoulders, Cas let himself go again, let the tears come, sobbing with his head braced against the tile wall.

His head hurt. His heart hurt. And most of all, he wanted to know why. Why had Dean - why had he - Cas couldn't even bring himself to think it.

His first love. And his first heartbreak.

Dean had been incredibly drunk. That much was obvious. So maybe, *maybe* they could work through this. But he'd just been so weird lately, so distant -

Cas slammed a fist against the tile in frustration. He didn't know what to do, didn't know what to feel. He was hurt and angry and so very, very broken.
He had to talk to Dean. Period.

The day passed slowly. Sam returned first, without Sarah, and together they made a small dinner. The younger man seemed at a loss for words, so they didn't talk much at all, but Cas didn't miss the small looks of sympathy Sam shot his way when he thought Cas wasn't looking. He didn't miss the worry in his hazel eyes. He didn't miss the way Sam kept checking his phone, and his watch, or how he kept wandering to the windows and staring out into Remington. They had just settled into the couch, bowls of spaghetti in their laps, when the Impala made herself known, and the tension in the air tripled.

Cas's stomach tossed, heart climbing into his throat, and he set the bowl on the coffee table.

Sam gently touched his knee. "It's going to be ok," he said softly, reassuringly.

Dean was none too quiet, making his way up the stairs with various bangs and grunted curses.

"He's drunk," Cas sighed, "again."

"Shit."

They had both just turned towards the stairwell when Dean emerged, white tee stained and torn along the edges, jeans also dirty. He was a mess.

"Gonna take a shower," he grunted.

"Dean -"  

"What, Sammy?" Dean asked tiredly, halfway to the bathroom, eyes wary.

Sam shrugged his shoulder in Cas's direction, where he sat frozen on the edge of the couch. "Don't you think we should, y'know, talk? About last night?"

"What is there to talk about? I fucked up. Again. Isn't that the norm?" He wobbled slightly, and Cas could smell the alcohol on him.

Apparently, so could Sam. "You're drunk. You ass! You drove, and you're drunk! Where the hell have you been all day anyway?"

"What does it matter? Huh? When did you become my mother, Sam?" Dean's eyes darkened with anger, as he drew himself up to his full height, facing his now standing, and much taller younger brother.

"What is your deal? You fucking cheated on Cas, or were you too drunk to remember that?"

And unreadable look passed behind Dean's eyes, and Cas wanted to run. He didn't want to hear anything Dean had to say. He started backing towards his room.

"So I fucked a chick? So what?"

"Dean…" Cas whimpered, "don't. We can work this out. We can."

Dean's eyes were cold and angry. "Maybe I don't want to."

"What the fuck, Dean?"

"Ain't none of your business, Sam. Look, Cas, it was fun, ok? But it's done."
The floor dropped out from under him.

"Why are you being, why are you being so cold? You don't, you don't, you can't mean that, Dean, please, no, no -"

"I don't love you."

Silence fell over the firehouse. Sam's eyes were wide and disbelieving. Dean's cold and angry.

"You d-don't me-mean th-that," Cas stumbled, his voice breaking.

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry." And with that, Dean turned, and in six long strides, walked into his room, shut the door firmly, the lock clicking into place behind him.

Cas couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

"Cas, I'll talk to him, he doesn't mean it, he doesn't, he can't, he can't…"

"No, Sam. He meant it. He meant every word. He meant every word."

"Cas…"

He didn't hear him, he just left Sam standing, impotent and wide eyed, in the middle of the living room as he wandered, numb and dazed, back to his own room, shutting and locking the door behind him.

He didn't sleep that night and Castiel was packed and gone by morning.

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**Now**

Dean dragged the trash can out into the alley behind the firehouse, smiling up at the tiny white flakes that had started falling. It was December 23rd, and despite his best efforts, Sam's Christmas enthusiasm had finally caught him. He'd made cookies with his brother, and even helped him trim the tree. There were wrapped packages stacked underneath the branches, lights strung in the windows, and the furnace was actually working this year.

The place smelled good, and looked better, and Dean found himself in the best mood he'd been in for quite some time.

Did it have something to do with the man he kept running into all over Baltimore?

*Maybe*, he thought, smiling to himself.

Dean didn't know how it kept happening, just that it was, and he'd stopped feeling uncomfortable about halfway through lunch in White Marsh two days before. The 22nd had found him at the Barnes and Noble in Harborplace, and he had texted Cas himself, asking if he wanted to meet for lunch.

The afternoon had run away from them, sitting in Cooper's Tavern in Fells Point, sharing a pizza and a few pints, laughs and memories, and it was all coming back. All of it. The reasons he fell in love with Cas in the first place. His smile, the way the skin around his eyes crinkled when he laughed, how blue those eyes were, his quick wit and the way he looked at Dean...it was all coming back.

Anna breaking up with him was quickly fading from his memory, and for the first time in years, *years*, Dean was smiling again, smiling like he hadn't in so long, looking forward to each new
day, looking forward to seeing Cas.

Sam was strutting around with a rather smug grin on his mug these days, and Dean found he didn't really mind at all. Life was looking up. He could barely believe it himself.

Dean bounced up the stairs and into the living room, heading for the bathroom. He walked to the back of the locker room and pulled his clean sheets out of the dryer. Humming snippets of Christmas tunes to himself, he changed his sheets and put the rest of his laundry away, tidying up his bedroom in the process.

He hit the shower next, then got dressed, choosing his outfit carefully, pulling a nice black button down and his best dark blue jeans from the closet.

It wasn't a date, he reminded himself. Just friends meeting for drinks. Him and Sam, and Gabe and Cas. Just friends. Just drinks.

Right. That's why he was dressing so nice.

*Shit.*

"Not a date, not a date, not a date," he muttered to himself, fingers pulling the buttons through the holes.

"Hey, you ready? I'm ready!" Sam's voice echoed through the firehouse.

"Yeah, one minute dude!"

"Hurry the fuck up, jeez!"

"Ok, ok." Dean splashed a little cologne on his neck, and reached into his closet for a jacket, fingers brushing against warm leather. He pulled out the leather jacket Cas had given him for Christmas all those years ago and stared at it critically.

"Come on, Dean!"

Oh, what the hell. Why not? He slid it on over his black shirt, stopping to catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

Ok. He looked hot. Damn.

"Not a date, not a date, not a date."

Sam was in the kitchen, sipping a glass of water, when he finally emerged and the little shit let out a low whistle.

"What?" Dean asked, self-consciously sweeping his hands over the shirt and jacket.

"Nothing, man, you look nice. Like really nice."

"Too much?"

"Nah, just enough. You look good."

Dean nodded, his eyes sweeping over Sam. "Dude. You're all dressed up too. What the hell?"

Sam blushed. "Well, Gabe's coming -"
"Oh ho ho, I see."

"Not like that," his brother mumbled. "Just wanna look nice. Gabe and Cas always look nice."

"Sure."

"Dean!"

"What?" Dean asked, all faux innocence and wide eyes, "you look nice."

Sam bitch-faced at him. "Come on, let's go already, jeez!"

Cas and Gabe found seats for all four of them in the back of Benny's busy pub, and the bearded bartender grinned and waved from where he was filling pint glasses with amber liquid.

"This place ain't changed at all," Gabe said pleasantly, "and wow, the scenery is still just as attractive," he smiled, eyes on the door.

Following his gaze, Cas smiled as Sam pushed through the door, in a black pea coat and a navy blue V-neck sweater, crisp black jeans clinging to his long legs. Sam turned, flipping a strand of hair out of his face, eyes lighting up as he caught sight of Cas and Gabe, a big grin directed at Cas's older brother.

"Damn. That just ain't fair."

"What?"

"That he's still so gorgeous and still won't give me the time of day."

"Maybe you're not trying hard enough."

"What do you think I've been doing…"

Cas didn't hear the rest of Gabe's words.

Dean pushed through the door, cheeks flushed from the cold. He looked around, waving to Benny, who cheerfully yelled something across the bar, then he turned, and green eyes found Cas, a sweet, genuine smile lighting up his face, and then Cas realized what he was wearing.

"He's wearing the jacket I bought him," he whispered, but Gabe didn't notice, he was already over at the bar with Sam, flirting his face off if that sappy expression was any indication, and Dean was striding across the bar in skin tight blue denim, eyes sparkling.

"Hey, Cas," he said, sliding into the booth beside him. "Wow, cold as shit out there!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together.

"Hello, Dean. How are you?"

"I'm good, I'm good, how 'bout you? Ready for Christmas?"

"Yes, I believe so. I finished my shopping today. You?"

"Yeah, I'm done. Sammy and I made about eight zillion cookies this week. Gonna make some pie tomorrow."
"Oh, I love pie."

"Me, too."

"I know."

Silence fell over the table, but it wasn't the least bit uncomfortable, as a waitress set a couple of beers down. "From the guys over there," she smiled, pointing towards their brothers, both of them wearing silly grins.

"Idiots," Dean mumbled.

"Indeed." Cas raised his glass. "Merry Christmas, Dean," he smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Cas," Dean smiled back.

It was one of the best nights of his life, at least one of the best he'd had in a very long time, and Dean was sweet and funny, and it was like he'd never left. Dean didn't drink nearly as much as Cas did, which seemed strange to him, but maybe it was for the best.

He leaned against his solid frame as Dean bent over the pool table to take a shot, Sam howling in protest as Dean won the game and happily pocketed Sam's crisp twenties.

"Ya snooze, ya lose, Sammy," Dean said cheerfully.

Gabe pulled Sam down and whispered something in his ear, and Sam blushed furiously but laughed, and Gabe looked very pleased.

They slowly drifted back to the booth, Dean resting his hand on the small of Cas's back, and that slight touch was doing things to him, making heat slide up his spine. He slid back into the booth, looking for Gabe, and finding him in the shadows of the bar, back by the pool table, Sam leaning up against the wall and looking down at him.

"You ok?" Dean asked.

"Just watching Gabe and Sam and tryin' to figure out what's goin' on there."

Dean's eyes tracked his brother's movements for a moment. "I wouldn't worry. I think they're good."

"Good. That's good. Good."

Dean chuckled and took a sip of his beer.

"What's so funny?"

"You. You're funny. You're buzzed to hell aren't ya, angel?"

"Yes. Yes I am." Cas thought about Dean's words. "You called me angel."

"Yeah," Dean said softly.

"Haven't heard that in a long time."

"I know."

They sat quietly for a while after that, Cas gradually slumping until he was propped against Dean's
shoulder, face pressed against the silky fabric of his shirt. He might have dozed a bit.

"Cas?"

"Mmm?"

"You're drooling on me."

"Oh."

"Yeah, you sound real concerned. Maybe I should get Gabe to take you home?"

Cas opened an eye, peering around the bar for his brother. "I don't see him."

Dean's phone chimed, and he pulled it out to look at it. "Oh Christ," he mumbled.

"What? What's the matter?"

He held the phone so Cas could read the text.

-Gabe and I are gonna go bowling. Don't wait up.

"Huh."

"Yeah."

"He was my ride."

"I know."

"Call me a cab? Please?"

"I could drive you…"

"Just get me a cab, Dean. Please?"

Dean drummed his fingers on the table. "You could, I mean, your room, you could um, you could -"

"What, Dean?"

"You could just stay next door," he breathed.

Cas sat up, caught Dean's eyes. "You sure?"

"Yeah. I mean, you have a bed there still, and some of your clothes, and it's cold and I can drive you back to the hotel tomorrow, but you don't have to -"

"Thank you. That will work."

"Ok." Dean took a deep breath. "Ok."

"C'mon." Cas shoved Dean out of the booth, smiling as he reached for the leather jacket. "Didn't know you still had that," he smiled, watching Dean pull it on.

"Yeah. I um, never got rid of it. Obviously," he said, with a self-deprecating grin. "C'mon. I'm tired, and I'm sure you are too."
This was a bad idea.

This was a terrible idea.

In the grand scheme of bad ideas, this was the grand poobah.

*What am I doing, what am I doing, what are you thinking Winchester?!*

Dean followed Cas out of the bar, smiling as he turned his face up, opening his mouth and sticking out his tongue, catching snowflakes as they drifted slowly down to Earth.

*God, he's so beautiful, he thought, still so gorgeous…*

A lump formed in his throat, unbidden, tears burning hot behind his eyes. He'd been so cruel to Cas, shoving him away, telling him he didn't love him.

Fuck.

"Hey, Cas, it's getting cold. Let's go in, yeah?"

Cas turned, snowflakes caught in his eyebrows and clinging to his hair, lips spread in a sweet, generous smile. "But it's snowing. And it's after midnight so it's Christmas Eve! It's too pretty to go in!"

There was a light post in front of the firehouse, and Cas ran over, grabbed it, and swung around like a pole dancer.

Dean stared. He was so beautiful, everything was beautiful, with the Christmas lights on the firehouse tinting the snow, and he stepped forward, as Cas rotated, slowing as he came to face Dean, so close that Dean could see the colored lights reflecting in his blue, blue eyes.

"*Cas,"* he breathed, as time seem to freeze like the air around them, Cas letting go of the pole. Inches from each other, gazes locked, Dean felt himself drawn inexorably closer, sucked into Cas's orbit.

He was going to kiss him. For the first time in twelve years, caution be damned, he was going to kiss him, and Cas smiled up at him, encouraging him -

A car door slammed, an alarm screamed, and they both jumped, Dean moving back a step.

"Shit, it's cold out here," Cas complained, rubbing his arms. "Can we go in?"

"Sure. C'mon."

Dean unlocked the door to the firehouse, closing it behind them, and Cas giggled.

"What's funny?"

"It's dark, I can't see anything, but I can find the stairwell, and it still smells the same. I smell Impala!" Cas chortled.

"C'mon, let's get your drunk ass up the stairs."

"Yes. I would very much like to see a bed right now."

They made it up the stairs without incident, and the Christmas tree twinkled in the window, backlit by the streetlights and the swirling snow.
"Don't turn on the lights," Cas murmured, and Dean let his hand fall from the switch. "It's so pretty. Just like I remembered." Cas walked across the floor, as if in a daze, and Dean watched as his fingers reached out to touch the ornaments. "I remember this one," he said softly, brushing a snowman with his fingertips. "Ellen gave it to us."

"Yeah." The lump was back. He walked slowly across the floor, coming to stand next to Cas. "And this one was from Benny," he smiled, pointing to the silly crawfish wearing an old time mariner's hat, like the Cajun himself preferred.

Cas touched an angel with blonde hair. "You made this one. For your mom."

Dean nodded.

"And this one was from Pam," he whispered, tapping the Tattoo Artists Know Where to Stick It ornament. He looked up. "And the angel," he breathed. "The one you made to look like me."

"Yeah."

Cas looked up at him, eyes sparkling as thousands of facets of multicolored lights danced in his irises. "You kept all of it."

Dean nodded again.

"I missed you."

"Hey, yeah, we should um, we should change your sheets, ok? 'Cause that bed hasn't been touched in twelve -"

Cas hooked a hand behind Dean's neck, pulling him down and he couldn't think, he couldn't breathe, but their lips were touching and Cas was kissing him. It was Christmas Eve and snow was falling and Cas was kissing him.

Oh god, Cas was kissing him and he could just let go, could let Cas sweep him away and -

"Cas, stop. Don't, don't." He gently pushed Cas back, refusing to look in his eyes. "I- I can't. I can't. I'm sorry. I can't." He scrubbed at his face with his hand. "I'll get sheets. Ok? I'll get the sheets."

And chickenshit that he was, he moved away from Cas as quickly as he could, all but running to his room for the sheets, and flipping on the overhead lights as he passed the switch.

This was a very bad idea.

There was soft piano music, and he was warm and comfortable, and very sleepy. He blinked in the darkness, and tried to roll over and go back to sleep, but the piano notes were insistent, calling to him, pushing him out of his sleepy state.

Cas fumbled for his phone, checking the time. It was four in the morning. Hadn't he just gone to bed? He slid out from under the covers, wincing as his feet hit the cold ground. Cas yanked the comforter off his bed, wrapping it around himself and quietly opening his bedroom door.

"…Questions of science, science and progress, do not speak as loud as my heart."

Dean was at the piano, twinkling Christmas lights silhouetting his body as his hands moved up and down the keyboard, singing softly in his mellow, whiskey-warm voice.
"Tell me you love me, come back and haunt me, oh and I rush to the start. Running in circles, chasing our tails, coming back as we are."

Cas stood in the doorway of his old room, mesmerized by the play of muscles under Dean's thin tee, fascinated by how his fingers knew the notes, picking them out, even in the darkness of the room.

"Nobody said it was easy, oh it's such a shame for us to part. Nobody said it was easy, no one ever said it would be so hard. I'm going back to the start."

He walked across the cold floor, feet making no sound; still, Dean didn't startle when he sat beside him on the piano bench. Green eyes sparkled with colored light as he turned to smile softly at Cas.

"Did I wake you?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep."

"It's ok. Please play some more. I've missed your playing."

"What would you like me to play?"

"Remember the first song you ever played for me?"

Dean nodded.

"Play that, please?"

"Ok." Dean stretched his hands, positioning them over the keyboard. He played the intro, and softly began singing.

"There are places I remember. All my life, though some have changed. Some forever not for better, some have gone and some remain. All these places have their moments, with lovers and friends I still can recall. Some are dead and some are living. In my life I've loved them all."

Cas watched his fingers, remembering how they felt on his spine.

"But of all these friends and lovers, there is no one compares with you. And these memories lose their meaning, when I think of love as something new."

He remembered the first time Dean played for him, the first time he'd heard him sing.

"Though I know I'll never lose affection, for people and things that went before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life I love you more."

He remembered Dean reaching around him to direct Cas's fingers on the keyboard.

"Though I know I'll never lose affection, for people and things that went before, I know I'll often stop and think about them. In my life I love you more."

Dean stared at him, fingers slipping from the keyboard as he murmured the last line. "In my life I love you more," Dean whispered.

"Remember that night, Dean? When Victor interrupted us?"

"He always did have terrible timing…"
"He's not here now."

"No, he isn't - Cas -"

"Ssh, it's ok, Dean, it's ok," he breathed, opening his arms and pulling Dean into the blanket, pulling him into his embrace, and then they were kissing again, Dean's lips sweet and soft against his own.

It seemed a natural progression, moving to his bedroom from the piano, laying Dean out on the bed and stripping his clothes away, as they moved together, and Dean cried out beneath him as he slid inside for the first time in twelve years.

Time fell away and they were twenty-one again, clinging to each other, slick skin and sweat, Dean's fingers digging into his hips.

He smiled down at him, leaning in for a kiss, thrusts losing rhythm as he neared completion.

Headlights bounced through the room, and his eyes caught on the handprint. Cas fit his hand against the tattoo, and Dean screamed, arching his hips up into Cas as he came, crying out his name in the night, and Cas tumbled down after him.

And as they laid there, wrapped around each other and waiting for their pulses and breathing to return to normal, Cas couldn't help but smile into the darkness.

Twelve years. Twelve years and he was finally home.
Chapter End Notes

Art by Linneart
The air in the firehouse was cold, but Dean was warm. There were arms wrapped around him, and hair tickling his nose, bare skin pressed against his own. He regained consciousness slowly, awareness trickling back in and the smell of Cas filling his nose. Dean shifted enough to look down at the man in his arms.

Cas was still asleep, head pressed into Dean's shoulder with his dark hair sticking up in every direction, face peaceful and pink lips slightly parted. His breathing was slow and deep, and for a while, Dean forgot the past and lived solely in that moment. No time had passed, and they had never parted ways.

Reality set in gradually, as Dean contemplated what had happened with a tight ball of dread in his gut. Things were never this easy for him. Never. He didn't get to be this happy without paying a price.

And was he happy? Waking up in the firehouse with Cas pressed against him? Was that something that made him happy?

Yes, he decided, but it also made him painfully cautious, the reality of how fast things were moving breaking through his burgeoning contentment. It hadn't even been two weeks since Anna ended their engagement. It was too soon, it was too easy, and as he lay there, Dean steadily worked himself into a panic, his emotions and thoughts spiraled out of control as he lost focus, and he could feel the fine tremors beginning in his arms and legs.

_Not now_, he thought, _not while he's here in bed with me. Not now._

Dean had recovered, mostly, from the 2x4 his father applied to the side of his head. But he knew he was different, hell, Sam had made that clear enough. Sometimes, he'd stare off into space, zoning out, he forgot things easier than he used to, he'd lost a lot of his sense of humor, and the worst thing of all, he couldn't paint anymore.

That had been the hardest blow to take. As he healed, and worked with the physical and neuro therapists, his goal, his endgame, was to recover enough to start painting again, but it never came back. Not like he'd been able to before. And while he loved teaching, loved being with the kids, he missed painting terribly.

He shifted, pressure in his chest tightening, as he felt the burn of unshed tears build behind his squeezed shut eyelids.

"I can hear you thinking. What's wrong?" Cas asked softly.
"N-nothing."

The other man shifted and propped himself up on one elbow, and Dean opened his eyes to concerned blue ones staring him down. "You're trembling. What's wrong?"

"Nothing, Cas, I'm ok. I swear. I just need to wake up."

"Ok." Cas murmured, snuggling back down into Dean's shoulder. "If you're sure. I was thinking I could make breakfast for you. Do you have eggs and bacon and stuff?"

"Uh, yeah, I think so." Dean blinked a few times, willing the tears back to where they'd come from.

"So how about pancakes and bacon? Remember how I used to make the pancakes with the vanilla and lemon juice? You'd tell me they melted in your mouth." Cas's hands were wandering, as he nonchalantly talked about making breakfast, fingers sliding along Dean's naked thigh.

Panic built in his chest, as Cas trailed his hand upward, brushing along the jut of his hip and across his stomach, but even with the panic, his body was responding, blood rushing southward, and a slow curl of arousal unfurled in his gut.

The other man shifted again, moved closer and pressed his lips to Dean's, wrapping a hand around his neck and pulling him closer still, and dear god, he let it happen. He let Cas carry him away, let desire and arousal and want and need direct his fingers, slick with lube, sliding into Cas and prepping him slowly, his mouth on his dick and Cas's fingers carding through his hair.

"Feel so good, Dean, so good," Cas whined, as Dean added another finger, scissoring and stretching, all while fucking his own mouth on Cas's cock. "C'mon, baby, c'mon, fuck me, fuck me," Cas babbled.

Dean pulled off and climbed back up the bed, leaving a trail of kisses up Cas's torso. There were alarm bells ringing in his head, everything in him protesting what they were doing, but he ignored it, pushed it away, let the pleasure overwhelm him as Cas dragged him down, slamming their lips together and pushing his tongue inside Dean's mouth.

He pulled Cas's right leg over his shoulder, and lined up, pushed inside, swallowing the low groan that tumbled from his perfect pink lips, reveling in the feel of Cas's hips pushing up into his own.

Dean could forget. He could forget that just a few days ago, the very sight of Cas made him want to run and hide. He could forget Anna. He could forget the bleak, black years of missing Cas and all the regret that went along with it. It was simple. He could let Cas back in, let himself fall in love again.

Cas pulled him down for another hot kiss, and Dean worked his hand down between them, stroking Cas as best he could with their bodies pressed together.

"Feel so good, Cas, so good."

Opening his eyes, pushing his body up, he locked his elbow, staring down at Cas, and Dean's heart pounded and stuttered against his ribs.

"C'mon, baby, let go," Cas growled, "just let go."

Blue eyes wide, staring up at him with unfiltered adoration, so much love in his expression, it was almost more than he could handle, Cas looking at him like that, Cas loving him, and it took only that glance, that heated stare, to push him over the edge, heat building in his belly and exploding white in
his vision.

Dean's arm gave out, and he sprawled across Cas's chest, sticky liquid warmth pressed between them.

Fuck it. Fuck all of it. Fuck his doubts and his caution and fuck his slightly broken head.

They'd make it work. Somehow, they'd make it work.

Dean woke again, a short time later, stretching and enjoying the low burn of overworked muscles. He didn't remember dozing back off, but the other side of the bed was empty, and the smell of breakfast was in the air.

He smiled, hummed a little random tune to himself as he pulled his body out of Cas's bed, searching the floor for his sweatpants. He found them, and Cas's phone, on the floor on Cas's side of the bed, and picked them up, walking towards the window as he pulled his pants on one-handed.

The world outside was covered in snow, everything white, pristine, and sparkling, a perfect Christmas Eve morning. He looked down, smiling at Benny tossing a snowball at Bobby, the older man cursing good-naturedly at him, as they worked together to clear the sidewalk in front of the pub and the Roadhouse.

A sleepy-warm strand of contentment seeped into his bones. A peace he hadn't felt in years, hell, maybe peace he'd never felt at all, filled his chest as he smiled up at the sky, watching lazy white flakes of snow drift mesmerizingly downward.

The phone chimed in his hand, and he looked at the screen.

-So? Did it work? I stayed out all night for you guys. And your brother is a pain in my ass. I like him anyway.

The message was from Sam.

Dean frowned, opening the message thread, scrolling through the texts, his heart sinking with every one that he read, most of them from Sam to Cas, and as he looked through them, he realized what it was.

Locations. Times.

-Gabe and I are going bowling after Benny's. We'll leave you and Dean with the place to yourselves after a while.

-Target, White Marsh, about an hour.

-The Bullpen, near Raven's Stadium, and yeah bring Gabe. We'll be there by six.

-Broadway Market, Fells Point, getting crab cakes, should be there in 20.

-Out with Dean. Shopping. Wanna drop in?

-Whole Foods, off of Falls Road. Know where it is?

-Cas, call me when you can. I have a great idea to get you and Dean back together!

-It's over. Anna and Dean broke up.
-I'll try and call you later. Don't contact Dean yet. He's a mess.

His hands were shaking again.

God, Sam. Sam. He trusted Sam more than anyone in his life and to find this…

Dean swallowed hard, nausea twisting his stomach. He backed up towards the bed, sinking down into it, unable to pull his eyes from the phone.

His brother, his sweet baby brother, the kid he'd practically raised himself, god, Sammy - Sam set him up. He'd engineered the whole thing.

"Breakfast is ready." Cas stood in the doorway, a dish towel draped over his shoulder. "Dean? You ok?"

"Was any of it real?" Dean asked brokenly. "Any of it?"

"What are you - oh, god," Cas breathed, finally noticing his phone in Dean's hand. "Dean, I can explain."

"Yeah. I bet you can." He stood, dropping the phone on the bed. "I think you need to leave."

"Dean, please, he was just trying to help…"

"And you went along with it? Seemed like a good idea at the time, right? Dean doesn't know what he wants, Dean doesn't know what he needs, so we'll just take matters into our own hands, right? Right?!"

"It was - it was a bad idea. I should have told him no, but Dean, it's all still there. The last few days, they've been -"

"A lie! It was all a lie! You two manipulated me! You played me!"

"Dean, it wasn't like that, I swear, please-"

"No! No, you get out, goddammit, Cas, get out!"

"Just let me explain," Cas pleaded, eyes wide.

"No!" Dean shoved past him, out into the living room. "I never wanted this, any of this! Do you understand me?" He spun, turning to face Cas. "My fiancé just dumped me, in part because of you, and I needed time, not this, never this! I never wanted this!" He turned away from Cas.

"Why did you come to my book signing then? If you never wanted this, why did you come?"

Dean froze, halfway to his bedroom. "I don't know."

"Bull. The Dean I knew always had a reason. He may have been silly and impulsive, but he always had a reason."

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes it does," Cas insisted. "Why did you come?"

"Because I had to know!" he said finally, turning to face Cas again. "I had to know."
"Know what?" Cas asked softly.

"If there was still -" Dean swallowed. "If there was still a spark, if there was anything."

Cas took a step closer. "And is there? A spark?"

"Fuck, Cas," Dean whispered, a tear rolling down his face, "yeah, there's still a spark, god, there's a fucking bonfire, but it's not, it's not real. It's not real."

"Yes it is, Dean, I swear it." Cas's eyes were also filled with tears, and he took a step towards Dean. "Please, Dean, just let me -"

"No! No, you have to leave, you have to go," Dean stumbled back away from Cas, arms wrapped tight around his chest, half in his bedroom already. "Just go. Please. I can't do this. I'm not that guy anymore, I'm not, I'm different, please go, just go."

"Then let me get to know you now, don't push me away. I know what happened to you. I know what your dad did, Dean. Sam told me, he told me everything, and it's not something we can't work with, believe me," Cas pleaded.

"God, Sam sure likes to run his mouth, doesn't he? No, Cas. Just no. Just go." Dean blindly backed into his room, pushing the door shut and turning the lock, and for a moment, a crazy thought, that this must have been how Cas felt all those years ago, tumbled through his mind.

His hands were shaking, bad, like they hadn't in years, and he didn't make it much farther than the bottom of the bed, collapsing in a heap on the floor, back against the footboard.

Tears rolled freely down his face, his throat raw and sore.

"Dean," Cas tapped on the door, his voice wrecked, "please open the door. I don't want to do this again. Please, Dean. Please."

Dean didn't respond, just stared at the door, and after a time, Cas grew quiet. He could hear him moving around, gathering things in his old room, then footsteps stopped in front of his door.

"You have to understand," he said softly, voice cracking, "I didn't want to hurt you. I didn't want this, but Dean, I can't do this again. If you let me leave now, you have to understand. I won't be back. Not this time."

His jaw trembled, but he didn't move.

"Dean?"

Silence.

"Ok," Cas sighed, voice tired and resigned. "Goodbye, Dean. I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Dean whispered, but the footsteps faded away.

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**September 2001**

Dean woke suddenly early Monday morning, the firehouse still dark. He slid out of bed, cracking open his door and peering out into the living room, hoping no one was out there and he could go to the bathroom without getting accosted by Sam or Cas.
Yeah, he knew he'd fucked up. He knew it. Dean's head spun as he picked his way slowly across the room, aware that he was still incredibly drunk. On the way back, he felt a pang as he stared at Cas's bedroom door. He walked over, raising his hand to knock.

"He's gone," Sam said, "left an hour ago."

Dean turned to find his brother sitting on the couch, dim light from outside limning the edges of his hair, face in shadow.

"Well, when will he be back?"

Sam stood, and huffed angrily. "You fucking idiot. He packed his stuff and someone came and got him. He's gone, Dean. Gone gone." Sam stalked across the living room, going back to his own room and slamming the door.

"No," Dean whispered, turning and pushing Cas's door open.

He flipped on the light, and his jaw dropped.

The closet hung open, most of the hangers empty. Several books were missing from the shelves. But the most telling thing, the most damning evidence of how badly he'd fucked up, lay in the center of the made bed, on top of Azrael's trenchcoat.

Castiel left his cell phone behind.

No note, no goodbye, just his abandoned cell phone lying in the middle of the bed.

Dean reeled, a rush of lightheadedness creating a low buzz in his ears. He'd seen all he needed to see, and his hand fumbled for the switch, plunging the room into darkness again.

Stumbling, he backed out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

Back in his own room, he retrieved a bottle of cheap shit whiskey from his closet and took several deep swigs, collapsing onto the center of his bed after. Tears rolled silently down his face, puddling in his ears, and he drank until he passed back out.

When he came around again, the sun was entirely too bright in his room, and it was hot and stuffy. His stomach gurgled unpleasantly, and he barely made it to the toilet in time. Afterwards, he slumped against the stall wall in a stupor, staring into space until Sam found him and forced him into a cold shower.

"Thought you were all pissed at me," he growled.

"Yeah, I'm pissed. You're a disgusting drunk mess that ran off the best thing that ever happened to you, and for what? For what, Dean?" Sam stripped down to his boxers and got in the shower, pulling Dean's soaked shirt off of him and helping him strip, averting his eyes while he supported him enough to get cleaned up.

"But you're still my brother," he said softly, "and you took me in, and you took care of me. I don't know what's going on with you, but I'm here for you. Let me help you."

Dean choked off a sob, but couldn't hide the one after that, or the one after that, and he was still crying when Sam wrapped him in a towel and sent him in the direction of his bedroom. He collapsed on the center of his bed, and slept until Sam woke him at six to feed him some of Ellen's chicken noodle soup.
"We should talk," Sam said, "about what the hell happened."

Dean shoved the bowl back against the counter. "I don't want to talk about it, Sam." And he went back to his room, ignoring Sam's frustrated sigh as he shut the door.

He didn't sleep that night, but paced his room instead, tearing himself to shreds, mentally screaming at himself. Dean was still awake when Sam left for school at seven, but finally passed out sometime after that, just to be woken again by a white-faced Sam a short time later.

"Dean, get up, get up."

"Nnggh. What's wrong? Shouldn't you be in class?" he fumbled for his phone. "It's quarter 'til ten, Sammy."

"Just get up. C'mon. It's important."

Groaning, Dean followed Sam into the living room, where the TV was on. Dean watched the events on screen for a moment, confused. "Is this a movie, Sam?"

"No," Sam's chin trembled, "it's live."

On screen, two buildings, which Dean easily recognized as the World Trade Center in New York City, were burning, smoke billowing from the upper floors of both of the towers. "What the fuck is happening?"

"Planes. They crashed into the building. They thought the first one was an accident, but then the second one...and then another plane crashed into the Pentagon, and my god, Dean, they're saying terrorists...that it's a terrorist attack…"

And as he said it, a great cloud of dust rose from one of the towers, the building folding in on itself as Sam and Dean stood speechless in their living room, horrified by the scene playing out on TV. The newscaster's voice shook, as he announced that the South Tower had collapsed.

"Oh my god," Sam whispered, "all those people. All those people."

Dean sank into the couch, unable to tear his eyes from the screen, hand slipping over his open mouth. "I can't believe this is real…"

Sam sat beside him, and they continued to watch in shock, unable to tear their eyes from the screen. By the time the newscasters announced that Flight 93 had crashed in a Pennsylvania field, an uncharacteristically solemn Benny had joined them, curling up in one of the recliners. Ellen and Bobby joined them as part of the Pentagon collapsed. Tessa and Pamela, Ash, Andy, and Jo had all gathered in the living room by the time the North Tower fell at 10:28 a.m.

No one talked.

No one ate.

But they stayed together, none of them wanting to be alone, none of them able to walk away from the endless replays of the planes crashing into the buildings, or of the stories of the possible passenger uprising on Flight 93, or how the hijackers had gone to pilot training in the US, that they'd been planning the attack for some time, and they all stared in shock at the people celebrating in the Middle East, children burning American flags.

It was unbelievable, and surreal, and all Dean could think about, the only thought pushing through
the fog of disbelief in his grief-stricken mind was *I have to find Cas*.

Jo curled into his side, wrapping her hand around his, and Sam sat tightly pressed against his other side. His cobbled together Remington family stayed gathered in his living room for most of the day, and no one really talked.

Sometime after ten p.m., Dean finally noticed they were all gone, save Sam, who was still sitting close beside him. Dean had passed the day in a state of shock, thoughts on Cas, and all the ways he wanted to say he was sorry, and of all the people who wouldn't get to say *goodnight* or *I love you* to their family members that night.

He didn't remember going to bed, but he was lying in bed, crying soundlessly, when Sam pushed the door open.

"Can I lay in here with you? I know it sounds stupid, but I'm...I'm scared, Dean," Sam whispered. "I don't want to be alone."

"It's not stupid, and yeah, I don't want to be alone, either, Sammy," Dean sniffled. "C'mon in."

Sam crawled into the bed, and the brothers faced each other in the dark.

"You're crying," Sam whispered.

Dean nodded.

"Is it about Cas?"

"Y-yeah. God, I fucked up, Sam, I fucked up so bad."

Sam reached over and to Dean's surprise, pulled him closer, into a tight hug, and Dean let himself go, sobbing into his little brother's chest, while Sam held him, and rubbed his back.

"Dean, what happened? Seriously. What happened?"

"S-so s-stupid," Dean gasped, "I'm so fuckin' stupid."

Pushing him back, Sam's tear filled eyes met Dean's in the dark. "Why don't you start at the beginning? What happened, Dean? Maybe I can help."

Sniffling, Dean pulled away from Sam, sitting up and reaching for his light, switching it on. They both blinked, as their eyes adjusted. Dean pulled his knees up to his chest, swiping at the tears on his cheek.

"It started with Vic," he murmured.

"Vic? I don't understand."

"He was so happy with Bela. They were gonna get married, and he was so fucking happy." Dean sniffled and rubbed at his eyes. "Then they just fell apart. And I dunno, I started doubting what Cas and I had and what I was planning to do..."

"What were you planning to do?" Sam asked confusedly.

Reaching over to his nightstand, Dean opened the drawer and pulled it open, retrieving a small black velvet box and handing it to Sam. His brother's eyes widened as he popped it open, revealing the platinum band inside.
"Dean…" Sam breathed, jaw dropping.

"I know it's not legal, and it wouldn't be the official to anyone but us, but I was gonna ask him to marry me, Sammy. Because I love him, and I just -" Tears spilled down Dean's cheeks again.

"What happened? This was more than just Vic's issues. Dean, what happened?"

Dean sighed, pulling himself from the bed.

"Dean?"

"Dad showed up. He was looking for you, but you were out with Sarah."

"When was - oh. That was the night you came home drunk and locked yourself in your bedroom. Right?"

"Yeah." Dean started pacing the room, and Sam scooted to the end of the bed, sitting cross legged as his eyes tracked Dean's movements.

"Did he say something to you?" Sam asked quietly.

Dean snorted. "Yeah." He stopped pacing, and ran both his hands over his hair. "Yeah, he said a few things."

"Like what?"

"He knew, y'know? 'Bout me and Cas? Told me he couldn't believe he had a fag for a son. He was so disgusted, but you know what? I could handle that. I could handle him hating me, but that wasn't the worst of it." Dean began pacing again, six steps across his bedroom floor, turn, six steps back, turn, wringing his hands as paced. "He had to bring Mom into it."

Sam huffed a sigh.

"He said she wouldn't have wanted this for me. That's she'd be - that she'd be -" Dean shuddered, "that she'd be disgusted by me. That she'd hate what I am, what I do, everything."

"I don't believe that."

"I know," Dean said miserably, "I know, but I let him get to me, and then the next night, I got drunk at Benny's, and that girl - God, Sam, I don't even remember coming back here! I was drinking, she was flirting with me, and everything's blank until I was on the floor, looking up at Cas in the doorway." "And the next day?"

"Yeah, the next day. Went for a drive. Found a bar. Drank too much. You know the rest."

Dean sunk to the floor at the foot of his bed, the springs creaking as Sam got up and came over to sit beside him. Tears were streaming down his face again, and Dean didn't bother to swipe them away.

"Worst lie I've ever told, Sammy, that I didn't love Cas. I love him so much it hurts. I love him so much. And now I've lost him."

Sam leaned over, pressing his shoulder against Dean's. "What would you say to him? If you could see him again?"
"Shit. I'd beg him to forgive me. I'd tell him how much I loved him."

"Then we find him."

"How? He left his phone here."

"Don't give up. We'll call everyone he knows. Someone has to know where he is, who he's staying with. We'll find him, and you'll apologize, and it won't be easy, but in time, you guys will be ok. You'll work it out." Sam sighed. "Just do things different this time. And stop paying attention to what Dad says about Mom."

Dean nodded, leaning into his brother's warmth. He swiped at the tears still rolling down his cheeks. "When didja get so smart, Sammy?"

Sam chuckled. "I had a good teacher," he said, gently nudging Dean's shoulder.

They eventually crawled back into bed, and Sam didn't go to school the next day, determined to help Dean track down Cas. But by ten, Dean was feeling rather hopeless.

"I've called everyone in his phone. His parents, his brothers, his friends, hell, I even called Lucifer! No one knows where he is! And now his family is worried, and I'm in the doghouse even more with Amelia Novak." Dean tossed his and Cas's cellphones on the kitchen counter. "What the hell am I going to do?"

"You're going to chill. I just made us an appointment at three with a private investigator. We're going to find him, Dean, ok? Trust me." Sam closed the phone book and set it on the counter next to the phones. "I'm not giving up, and neither are you. Sarah's brother is a Baltimore cop, and he's looking too. He's got a friend that can run Cas through the police network. We'll find him, I swear it."

Sam's phone rang, and he answered it, while Dean picked Cas's back up, even though he'd called every number on it, hoping it would reveal something he'd missed.

"That was Ellen. She needs my help at the Roadhouse for a bit. I'll be back in an hour or so. Why don't you try and paint or something."

Dean nodded, setting Cas's phone back down. "Yeah. I might."

"It's gonna be ok," Sam said. "We'll find him. Trust me." He patted Dean on the back and left the firehouse.

Walking down the stairs, Dean thought about all of the things he'd say if, no - when, they found Cas. He thought about all the I'm sorry and I love you's he would say, and how he'd do whatever Cas wanted him to do to prove he meant it. Absently rubbing the handprint tattoo through his tee, he pulled open the big double doors, letting the sun in. He stared up at the sky for a bit.

It was surreal, looking up and not seeing a single airplane in the sky. It was still hard to believe that the day before had actually happened.

"Talk about things that make you realize what's important," he mumbled to himself. Sighing, he walked back to his worktable, pulling the cover off the turntable and sliding Houses of the Holy out of its cardboard sleeve. The Song Remains the Same's familiar opening riff echoed off the brick walls, as he stared up at Azrael, glad he hadn't done the face yet. He wasn't ready to spend the next few hours staring at Cas's face glaring down at him in smite-y anger.

He'd work on the detail of the trenchcoat. That was mindless busy work, and it would be easy to
zone out while he did it. He gathered his paints, squeezing various blobs of yellow, brown, black, and red onto his large palette, shoved a couple of brushes into the back pocket of his jeans, then climbed up to the second level of the scaffold.

Working quickly, he added the base colors, coming back through and shading the wrinkles and folds of the coat, as Led Zeppelin wailed on the turntable below, losing himself to the work, and finally feeling some of the last several days' stress bleed out onto the canvas.

He loved painting. Painting was something he could control. The paints did what he wanted, when he wanted, and although it was probably an arrogant thing to think, Dean knew he was good at this, bringing angels to life on his canvas.

Dean was lost in the music, and the painting, and when someone cleared their throat behind him, he jumped, smearing the edge of the trenchcoat with a blob of red paint.

"This one of the ones you stole from me?" a deep voice asked, as *Dancing Days* abruptly ended.

Turning slowly, heart in his throat, Dean looked down at John Winchester, who was holding the vinyl and glaring up at him.

"It was Mom's," Dean said weakly.

"Which made it mine. Didn't have no right, boy," John slurred.

He set the palette on the wooden boards and climbed back down. "Sam's not here."

"Where is he?"

"At work."

"I told you to make sure he was here next time I showed."

Dean scoffed. "Well, it ain't like I knew when you'd bother showing up again."

"Watch your mouth." John slid the record back into the sleeve. "I'll be taking this with me. Where are the rest?"

"In that crate. Fine, take 'em. Probably just sell 'em for more booze, right? Not like you actually care about them." Dean wiped his hands with a rag as he walked behind the workbench, opening the ancient fridge and pulling out a beer. "Look, Sammy ain't here, won't be back for a bit, and you know what? I don't want you here. So there's the door. Go wait in your fucking truck or something."

He shoved past John, pushing the crate of albums across the workbench. "Take what you want. I don't care."

The right hook caught him by surprise, a flash of white sparks as his dad's fist connected with his jaw. Dean stumbled backwards, the beer bottle slipping from his grasp and shattering on the concrete floor.

"Don't you talk to me like that boy," John growled.

Dean rubbed his jaw and glared at his father. For the first time, John's words and actions didn't put him in his place. It didn't put him down. Anger rose instead, and Dean swung his own fist, catching John off guard with a right hook of his own.

The man stumbled backwards, surprised.
"Don't fucking touch me you miserable old drunk. Get the hell out! You're not welcome here, you understand me? This is my house, my life, and there's no room in it for you!"

"Don't talk to me like that!" John shouted again. "Show me some goddamn respect!"

"Respect?" Dean asked incredulously. "Respect?!!" Dean shook his head. "Respect for the man who's been treating me like garbage my entire fucking life? Respect for the man who tells me that he wishes I'd died instead of Mom? Respect for the man who stood here four days ago and called me a fag and said Mom would be disgusted by me? You don't give respect and you sure as hell ain't earned it!"

"Your mother was perfect. She wanted a real life for you, with a woman and kids, and this thing with that boy would -"

"Would make her smile. You know why? Because I'm happy. I remember her, Dad, I remember how much she loved me. I remember. I might have been four, but I remember! She loved me. She wanted me to be happy. That's what she wanted for me. You son of bitch! I won't let you use her against me anymore!" Dean shoved past his dad.

"You're disgusting, Dean. Disgusting."

"Yeah, well, you know what? A few days ago, I bought into your crap. I bought into it. And I sent Cas away. It was stupid, but I'm gonna fix it. I'm gonna find him. And I'm going to apologize and I'm going to fix it, and you know what?" Dean smiled, thinking of Cas and his beautiful blue eyes, "I'm going to ask him to marry me. Because I love him. I love him and I'm going to spend the rest of my life with him. So fuck you, Dad. I don't need you anymore, hell, I never needed you. Fuck off and leave me alone."

Dean turned away, intent on walking out the front door, and down to the Roadhouse, when Sam appeared in the doorway, eyes wide, yelling a warning "Dean!" as an eruption of white stars exploded across his vision along with a terrible pain slamming through the back of his head, skull ringing like a broken bell.

His knees buckled, or turned to liquid, as the floor rushed up to meet him, and he went down. It should have hurt, hitting the floor like that, but Dean didn't feel a thing.

Sam's white face loomed over him, as his big hands carefully rolled Dean onto his back, gently moving his head, eyes wide and horrified as he looked down.

His mouth was moving, he was saying something, and Benny and Bobby appeared in the doorway with Ellen. Things were moving so fast; Benny was putting John on the ground, Ellen joined Sam, Bobby had his phone out - so much was happening, and he wanted to get up, wanted to tell Sam he was ok, wanted to wipe the tears from his brother's frightened face, but he couldn't move, and he could tell Sam was telling him to hold on, just hold on, but blackness rushed up from the floor, painted the edges of his vision in unyielding obsidian. He was sucked under, and he realized with absolute terrifying clarity that he was dying.

He was dying, and he'd never get to tell Cas he was sorry.
Cas swiped angrily at his face, brushing away the tears that didn't seem to want to stop falling, as he shoved a pair of jeans into his suitcase. He pulled the last of his shirts from the closet and tucked them into his garment bag. In the bathroom, he packed all of his toiletries, slid the ditty bag into his suitcase, then zipped the bag shut.

He moved all of his bags out to the suite's living room, laying the garment bag over the couch and setting the suitcase on the floor. At the desk, he carefully packed his laptop away, checking the bag for his passport.

Sighing, he dropped into the desk chair, flipping through the passport. He'd already booked a ticket on Air France. And he wasn't coming back this time. There was nothing left in Baltimore for him. Not if Dean didn't want him.

His eyes burned with yet more tears, and he didn't bother to hold them back. God, why didn't he tell Sam no? It was such a bad idea, and he'd known it from the start. They'd cornered Dean, and steered him into something he wasn't ready for.

No, this was his fault as much as Sam's. But he needed to walk away. Castiel was done having his heart dragged over the coals.

It would be better in the long run, for both him and Dean, to walk away now.

Maybe if he kept telling himself that, he'd believe it.

There was a knock at the door, and he sighed, brushing the last of the wetness from his face. Gabriel and Sam were on the other side, both grinning.

"So, how was your night?" Gabe asked cheerfully.

"Dean found our texts, Sam!" Cas said angrily. "It was a great night, and a better morning, until then!"

All the color left Sam's face, his happy smile vanishing. "Oh crap."

"Yeah, oh crap is right. He accused us of manipulating him, which we did, and which I never wanted in the first place! This is all your fault!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa there, Cassie. Sounds like maybe you're both at fault?" Gabe raised his hands, his voice placating. "I'm sure Sam was just doing what he thought was right."

"Yeah, defend him, Gabe. You've been in love with him since day one!"

"What?" Sam asked, wide eyes turned towards Gabe, "Is that true?"

"Not like that's the issue right now, though," Gabe covered, "you two messed Dean up. How're you gonna fix it?"

"Like this," Cas growled, grabbing his garment bag.
"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving, Gabe. I'm leaving. Fuck both of you. I'm done." He grabbed the suitcase and headed for the door.

"Wait, where are you going? We gotta figure this out, and is Dean ok? Did you just leave him?" Sam grabbed his arm, and a hot rush of anger flooded him, he saw red, and the next thing Cas was aware of was Sam stumbling back from him, blood spurting from his nose.

Gabe grabbed a handful of tissues, pushing them against Sam's nose. "Jesus, Cas!"

"This is all his fault!"

"Well no one made you go along with it," Gabe said angrily, "and you didn't have to hit him!"

"No," Sam gasped, "it's ok. It's ok, he's right, this is all my fault." Sam looked completely destroyed, dabbing at his face with the tissues. "It's all my fault," he said brokenly, sinking into a chair, "I put my nose where it really didn't belong and it backfired. Goddammit. I just wanted to do right by Dean."

"Well, this wasn't it. We fucked up, and he threw me out. It was too soon. He'd just broken up with Anna. It was just too soon, Sam. And now -" he sighed, picking up his coat from the couch and slipping it on, "it's over. There's no going back. I'm sorry, Sam."

"Got nothin' to apologize for, Cas. It's my fault."

Nodding, out of words, Cas reached down and grabbed his suitcase, turning and yanking open the door and storming out of the suite. He'd had about all he could take.

"Cas, wait!" Gabe called, but Castiel didn't stop. He reached the elevators as Gabe caught up with him. "Where the hell are you going?"

"Away!"

"C'mon, don't be like that. I don't want to lose you again, dammit!"

His shoulders slumped, as Cas deflated. "You won't. I'll stay in touch, I promise. But there's nothing left for me here. There's nothing left in for me in Baltimore."

"Where are you going?"

"Paris. Forgive me, Gabe. I'm sorry."

Gabe gathered him in a tight hug. "I'm sorry, too. Good luck, little bro."

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open. "Take care of Sam, Gabe. Dean's not happy with him, and things will be rough for a while."

"I will...if he lets me." Gabe swept a hand through his hair. "I love you. And I'm here. If you need anything, anything at all, just call. Bye, Cas."

Cas stepped into the elevator and smiled sadly at his brother. "Goodbye, Gabe," he whispered, as the doors shut.

Five hours later, he watched BWI disappear below him, as the plane ascended into the cloudy sky, pushing through the mist and leveling off into bright sunlight. Cas sighed, as he stared forlornly out
the window.

A week ago, he'd been filled with hope. Hope that Dean would at least welcome him back into his life, that maybe they could be friends again at least. But then last night…

Last night, when he held Dean in his arms, when he kissed him, when they made love - it was like the last lonely twelve years of his life slipped away with every touch and brush of lips against his, every sweet gasp that left Dean's lips. He’d had it all again, and lost it all just as quickly.

Maybe he should have stayed. Maybe he shouldn't have left again. Maybe he should…

No, Cas thought, no, this is what he wants, and this is what I need. This is just the way it has to be.

Settled, he crossed his arms over his chest, nodding as a flight attendant passed him. He was strong. He would be ok. Everything would be fine.

If only Castiel could make himself believe it.

Ten steps forward.

*Sammy set me up.*

Turn.

*Cas was in on it.*

Ten steps back.

*None of it was real.*

Turn.

*Was it just a game?*

Ten steps forward.

*I'm not who they want me to be.*

Turn.

*I can't be who they want me to be.*

Ten steps back.

*I'm not the same guy I was.*

Turn.

*I wish Sam could just accept me.*

Ten steps forward.

*Just accept who I am now.*

Turn.
I don't even know who I am anymore.

Ten steps back -

The door creaked open, and a sheepish Sam snuck into the firehouse, clearly not expecting Dean to be in the studio space. His eyes widened when he saw Dean, and the anger that he'd worked so damn hard to push down, to temper, flared up hot again, and he crossed the floor in six long strides, balled up his fist and slammed it into Sam's nose.

His brother staggered back, hands on his face, as blood flowed through his fingers and down his shirt.

"Fuck!"

"You son of bitch!" Dean yelled, pulling back and hitting him again, this time on his jaw, and Sam's head snapped to the right with the force of the blow.

"I trusted you! You son of a bitch, I trusted you!"

"Dean, I'm sorry! I'm sorry, I swear, I never meant to hurt you, god, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!" Sam sobbed, his hands raised, and he flinched hard when Dean stepped towards him again. "Please don't hit me again! I know I deserve it, but Dean…"

Dean froze. His hands dropped to his side, and he looked at Sam, really looked at him.

There was a bruise blooming along his jaw, brilliant red and purple, and his nose was swollen and still dripping blood.

Wow, Dean thought, just like Dad. He shuddered. Just like fuckin' Dad.

"Get out."

"Dean…"

"All the people in this world, Sammy, all the people - the one person I thought would always have my back, always, no matter what," Dean said quietly. "I trusted you. I trusted you like I don't trust anyone. And what you did, god, Sammy, how could you do that to me? All those innocent little run into Cas moments, and you engineered them all. Why? Why would you do that to me?"

"Dean…"

"I mean, I get it," Dean ran his fingers down the Impala's fender, "I'm not your Dean anymore. I get that you probably resent me for Sarah -"

"No, Dean, I broke up with her because between taking care of you and school, I didn't have time to dedicate to her. It wasn't fair to her! It's not your fault, Dean!" Sam protested.

"Taking care of me…"

"Dean, I don't, goddammit," Sam huffed. "I don't resent taking care of you!"

"But you want your 'brother' back, hell you've even said that to me. I'm not him anymore, Sammy, and I don't know how to fix it. I would if I could, believe me. But shoving me and Cas back together? That ain't gonna fix it either."

"I know. I'm sorry, and I just, I just wanted to help."
"Well, it didn't help. And you need to go get your stuff and go."

Sam's jaw dropped. "But it's, it's Christmas Eve. It's Christmas Eve, Dean."

"Get out." He crossed his arms over his chest again.

"Dean, please."

"GET OUT!" he screamed, "Get out, get out, get out!" He shoved Sam in the chest, and Sam stumbled back, his eyes wide, "just get out, just go, I mean it, go!"

A single tear rolled slowly down Sam's cheek, cutting through the blood. "Ok," he whispered, his expression so broken, Dean wanted to just collect Sam in his arms and beg forgiveness.

He didn't though. He resumed his pacing, turning away from his brother when Sam came back downstairs with his duffel and a slightly cleaner face.

"Look, Dean, I know it's not worth much, but my god, I'm so sorry. I was trying to do right by you, and I just made it worse. I know you're right. I know that fixing your life isn't going to fix mine. But, Dean, you gotta understand, anything I did, anything I said, it was all because I love you. You're my brother, and I love you and I just want you to be, to be," he choked back a sob, "I just want you to be happy."

Tears were streaming down Dean's cheeks, but he stayed where he was, back turned to Sam. He wouldn't let him see, wouldn't turn around and tell Sam he understood, because he did understand, he really did, and it would be so easy to just forgive him...

"I really am sorry. Merry Christmas, Dean."

Dean said nothing. He listened to the door open, then shut again. He stood there, not sure what to do next, when the rust colored spot of blood on the floor caught his eyes.

His blood. The blood that had poured from his ear and the cut on his head, as he lay on the floor, dying. You weren't supposed to remember stuff like that, after a head injury of that magnitude, but he remembered, he remembered everything.

Sam's tears, Ellen's white face, the pain he'd felt when his father hit him. He remembered Benny putting John on the ground. He remembered the fear of knowing he was dying. He remembered all of it.

Dean's anger at Sam refocused and it wasn't Sam he was mad at anymore. It was John. His father had done this, his father had broken everything, his father had destroyed his life.

Anger boiled the blood in his veins, and his hands itched. He wanted a fight. He wanted it bad.

He grabbed the first thing he found, an old metal sign, grabbed it and threw it as hard as he could. Then a hubcap. Then a crate, and then his vision blurred into vermillion and scarlet and blood orange. His hands found a crowbar.

"You son of a bitch! You treated me like shit!" Slam, the driver's window of the Impala shattered under the blow of the iron.

"Look out for Sammy! Look after your brother, boy!" The windshield cracked under the onslaught.

"I always did the right thing! I took care of him! I fed him! I raised him!" The windshield buckled,
exploding into the dashboard.

"I asked for one thing! One goddamn thing! And you called me a fairy! A goddamn fag!" The passenger window broke.

"I loved him! I loved him, I still love him and you made me!" Another window. "Doubt!" Rear windshield. "Everything!"

All the windows were gone now, glass everywhere, and still, his anger flared.

"I lost everything! Because of you, you goddamn worthless son of a bitch!" The crowbar landed on the trunk lid.

"I can't paint! Because of you!"

SLAM

"I lost Cas! Because of you!"

SLAM

"Sammy thinks his brother is gone! Because of you!"

SLAM

"But I'm a better man than you!"

SLAM

"I'm a better...I'm a better...

Dean froze, panting, as the anger abated, tears streaming down his face. He stared at his precious baby, his pretty girl, and the crowbar slipped harmlessly from his fingers.

"I'm a better man," he whispered. "I'm a better man. I will always be a better man than you," he said softly, sinking to his knees, his hand pressed against the Impala's fender.

The studio was destroyed. Crates and totes and boxes lay empty, contents scattered. He didn't remember doing that. And his baby…

"Oh. Oh, I'm so sorry, sweetheart," he whispered, patting her fender. "I'll fix you, I swear. I swear it." He pressed his forehead to the cold metal for a moment.

Calmness was settling in him. A peace, a serenity - the guilt, the worthlessness - it was slipping away, as Dean grasped onto the realization that he wasn't to blame. It wasn't all his fault. The things that had happened, his childhood - it wasn't his fault.

It wasn't his fault.

His eyes drifted to the scaffold, and the covered canvas behind it, and he was on his feet and moving again, digging through boxes, pulling out tubes of paint and brushes, his big palette, setting everything on the workbench, then he walked under the scaffold, popping the wheel brakes and pushing it to the side.

Dean stood at the foot of the painting, staring up at the white sheet covering it, and with a deep breath, he steeled himself, gathered the fabric in his fist and pulled, a shower of dust making him
cough as the fabric slipped away from the painting.

His eyes swept over it. The black suit, the backwards blue tie, the trenchcoat -

And then he was moving, shoving the scaffold back into place, squeezing paint tubes, adding colors to his palette, pleased to find so many of his paints still in serviceable condition.

He pulled out the turntable, and the crate of records; made a stack of vinyls on the record player; *Houses of the Holy, Dark Side of the Moon, Master of Puppets, Leftoverture, Zep II, Zep IV, The Grand Illusion*; he jacked the volume, grabbed brushes and his palette, climbed the scaffold and lost himself.

Dean painted, painted with everything in him, painted like he hadn't in years, surrounded by his music and the smell of linseed oil and turpentine.

He painted Cas's face, capturing the stern glare in the Polaroids still pinned to the side of the canvas, but adding the laugh lines and crow's feet he had now. He set up his jigsaw and cut fancy Italian porcelain plates into triangular shards and attached them over Cas's head. He attached an old neon sign to the canvas, running the wires down behind, and plugged it in, the red and blue glow adding another element to the painting.

He worked for hours, worked after all the records had played, and as dawn sent her first rays of morning through the glass windows of the big doors, he pushed the scaffold away again, sinking to the floor in a heap of paint-stained exhaustion.

It was done. Twelve years later and it was done.

Azrael - no - *Castiel* was done.
"C'mon, boy, get up, ain't good to sleep on the floor. What the hell happened in here anyway?"

Dean startled awake, curled into a ball on the concrete floor of the studio.

"What the hell happened to your car?" Bobby lifted his trucker hat and scratched at his head. "How'd she get into an accident in the firehouse?"

"Yeah," Dean mumbled, cheeks flaming, "she um...well, um, me. That's what happened."

"Ah," Bobby gestured to the wrecked floor of the studio. "Looks like Hurricane Dean was busy, huh?"
"Yeah."

"Well, get up. Get a shower. We're going for a ride."

"Um, ok? Where to?" Dean asked, groaning as he pulled himself to his feet, stretching his arms over his head and wincing as his spine popped.

"Well, kiddo, I just thought we'd go for a ride, maybe talk a little bit. Sound good?"

"Wanna talk, huh?"

"Yeah. Don't cha think maybe we should?"

"I guess…" 

Bobby handed him a box. "Little breakfast from the wife. Go get cleaned up. Meet me at the Roadhouse in twenty."

"Yeah, ok, ok," Dean acquiesced. He took the box and went upstairs, chomping on the bacon and eggs as he went. He took a hot, hot shower, letting the stream beat on his back and unknot his tired muscles.

He'd finished the painting. And maybe it wasn't exactly the way he'd pictured it, maybe he painted differently now, but Dean was honest with himself enough to admit that what he'd done, what he'd created - it was good. It was good enough that a smile flickered over his face.

Was he back? Dean wasn't sure. All he knew was that he'd made something, something that he could be proud of. And it had been an incredibly long time since he'd felt that way.

He dressed quickly after his shower in jeans, a black tee and a red and green flannel. He pulled his coat out of the closet and pounded down the stairs in his heavy boots.

Ellen handed him a to-go cup of black coffee when he let himself into the closed Roadhouse, and kissed his cheek.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Ellen." He hugged her. "You know, I don't think I've ever thanked you for everything you and Bobby did for me back when…" he trailed off, but she smiled and patted his shoulder.

"Oh sweetie, we're family. That's what family does for each other." She smiled again, and left the dining room. Bobby showed a moment later.

"Ready?"

"Yup."

Bobby led him out back to his old, rusty '71 Chevelle and Dean climbed inside.

"So where we going?"

"For a drive," Bobby answered shortly, "sit back and cool yer heels, idjit."

Dean smiled and leaned back in the seat. The long night of painting caught up with him quickly, and he fell asleep before they were even out to 83.
Bobby nudged him awake some time later, as he shut the car off. Dean blinked and stretched, looking around to see where they were.

"Oh no. Oh hell no. Bobby, what the fuck? Take me home right now. Fucking take me home!"

"No."

"I'll call a goddamn cab. I'm not going in there!" Dean glared at the sign for the Maryland Correctional Institute. "It's fucking Christmas Day and you shanghaied my ass to Jessup?! I'm not going in there! I don't want to see him!"

"He's been askin' for ya, kid."

"I don't want to see him! Did you forget the part where he almost killed me? Why would you bring me here, Bobby?"

Bobby stared out the windshield, scratching under his hat again.

"Take me home," Dean demanded again. "Take me home."

"He's dying, boy," Bobby said softly.

Dean froze. "What?"

"Cirrhosis. He's runnin' outta time, and just wants to see his boy one last time. It's Christmas, Dean, give the old man a break."

"He's really dying," Dean asked quietly.

Bobby nodded.

Dean sighed. "Ok. But you're coming in with me, right?"

"Yup."

"Ok. Ok then," Dean said, opening the car door and stepping out onto the parking lot. His stomach twisted, threatening to let go of the eggs and bacon he'd eaten. Dean leaned against the old Chevelle and breathed deep, in and out, until the nausea passed.

"You ok?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Let's do this," Dean said with a bravado he didn't feel. He let Bobby lead him inside, through the metal detector and into the hall outside the visitor's room. He could see John, sitting at a table waiting for him, and his stomach revolted. Dean shoved open the nearby men's room door, pushing his way inside and losing his breakfast in the first stall he came to. He hacked and gagged, tears streaming down his face, retching until there was nothing left.

"You ok?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Let's do this," Dean said with a bravado he didn't feel. He let Bobby lead him inside, through the metal detector and into the hall outside the visitor's room. He could see John, sitting at a table waiting for him, and his stomach revolted. Dean shoved open the nearby men's room door, pushing his way inside and losing his breakfast in the first stall he came to. He hacked and gagged, tears streaming down his face, retching until there was nothing left.

Bobby was there, patting and rubbing his back, murmuring, "it's ok, boy, it's ok. You're ok. Just breathe. Just breathe."

Dean's hands were shaking, and black spots danced in his vision. He dry heaved a couple of times, but nothing else came up. Bobby helped him to his feet, wet a paper towel at the sink, and gently wiped Dean's face.

"I can't do this," Dean whispered, "I can't. Take me home, Bobby, please. Please."
"No, boy. I know this is hard," he soothed, as Dean closed his eyes and shook his head vehemently, "but you gotta do this. You gotta make peace with him."

"I can't. I can't make peace, god, Bobby. I hate him. Do you hear me? I hate him!"

"Be that as it may, and I can't rightly blame you, don't let the old fart die without lettin' him speak his piece. I know this is hard on ya, I know this hurts. But Dean, he's dying. And it's Christmas. Just give him ten minutes of your time, ok? Just a lousy ten minutes. And then I'll take you home, I promise. Can you do that? For me?"

Dean sniffled, shuddered, and nodded.

"Ok. Good. C'mon. Wash your hands, and we'll get you out there."

Dean nodded again and did as Bobby asked, then with his heart in his throat, he let Bobby lead him out into the hallway, and into the visitor's room.

John stood as they entered, his dark eyes meeting Dean's for the first time in twelve years. His heart was pounding so hard, and his vision was still not cooperating. Dean was sure he was about to pass out, but he lowered himself into the bench opposite his father.

John sat back down as well, folding his hands on the tabletop, looked up and gave Bobby a half smile. "Thanks for bringing him."

"Yup." Bobby patted Dean's shoulder. "I'll be waitin' outside, kiddo."

Dean's head whipped around. "You're not staying?" he asked, voice squeaking embarrassingly.

"Ten minutes. Try and make it that long," he said softly, then turned and left.

Dean watched him go. He couldn't seriously be leaving him here with John. His hands started shaking harder and he lifted his legs and slid his hands beneath, sitting on them to hide the tremors.

"It's good to see you, son," John said. "I didn't think you'd come."

"Didn't really want to," he said quietly. "All Bobby's idea."

"I figured. But I'm glad to see you just the same." John ran a gnarled hand through his salt and pepper hair, more salt than pepper now. He was thin, not the larger than life presence he'd always seemed to Dean. His face was lined and weary, and age, not to mention years of alcoholism, had not been kind. He felt his father's eyes on him, sweeping over him from head to toe, as he sat unmoving on the bench.

"You look good. All grown up. It's been a long time."

Dean nodded. He didn't know what to say to the man.

"Look, Dean, I know you don't want to be here, and I sure can't blame you for that. And, believe me, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did to you, for how I raised you. I've had a long time to think in here, and dry up. Nothing like prison for getting a guy sobered up."

"Anyway, I've been talkin' to this pastor that comes around, Jim Murphy, and he's a pretty great guy. Talks about forgiveness a lot. Not just forgiving others, but learning to forgive yourself. Dean, I ain't done nothing right by you. Not your entire life. I blamed you for living when your mother died, I blamed you for taking Sam away from me - and none of that, not one bit of it, was your fault. None
of it."

Dean swallowed around the lump in his throat, and stared down at the table top.

"Shit, I know it's too late, believe me. And I don't expect you to forgive me. How could you, when I
won't ever be able to forgive myself?"

John sighed, scratched at the stubble on his chin and stared out the barred window. "So many nights,
I lie awake, starin' at the bunk over my head, and I talk to you mother. I say, Mary, how can that boy
ever forgive me? What I've done to him, I can't forgive myself, so why would he ever forgive me? I
can't make it right, I can't erase the hurt, I can't fix it. I can't fix any of it. And she never answers me,
Dean, she never tells me what to do. I used to dream about her. I'd drink and drink and drink and
when I finally passed out, she'd come to me. She'd hold me and comfort me, and everything would
be ok. She doesn't come to me anymore. Not anymore. But she used to. I used to look forward to
fallin' asleep just to see her.

"Then I'd wake up, and you'd be there, with your big green eyes just like hers, your lips, your hair,
your smile, everything just like hers. And every day, I'd look at you, my own son, and hate you for
reminding me of all I'd lost. I hated you. My own son."

Dean shook in his seat, anger rising in him. He wanted to reach across the table and throttle his
father, beat in all the pain and depression he'd rained down on Dean, wanted to make John hurt as
much he'd hurt him.

"I hit you, I wanted you to hurt, wanted you to pay for reminding me. And god, Dean, what kinda
father did that make me?"

"A bad one," Dean growled, unable to hold back any longer.

"You're right. A bad one. A horrible one. I didn't deserve you boys." He scratched his chin again.
"When you were little, you were the sweetest little thing. Your mom, she bought you this blue shirt
with a teddy bear on it. Said I wuv hugs," he laughed, "and god, did you ever. I'd come home from
work, and you'd come running outside, and you'd hug the Impala's fender first and yell, welcome
home 'pala, then you'd run over to me and jump up in my arms...you were the most loving little thing
I'd ever met. And you loved me, and you loved your mama best, but then Sammy came along. And it
was like you'd been missin' part of yourself your whole life, and little Sammy just came along and
filled in the gap. I've never seen a happier child."

He chuckled softly, eyes wet, "used to find you and that old ratty bear of yours in his crib every
night." He sniffled, a tear rolling silently down his cheek. "You were in there the night of the fire.
Almost lost all three of you that night..."

"I was?" Dean asked, surprised, "I don't remember that."

"That's 'cause you were probably still asleep when your mom got you out. I got Sammy out, but it
was - it was -" he shuddered, more tears dripping from his face, "it was too late for Mary. I tried,
Dean, god, I tried, and I would have traded myself - and you boys, you should have never had to
grow up without your mother. Should've never had to -" John buried his face in his hands, shoulders
shaking with silent sobs.

God, Sam was right. He was right. John was nothing more than a tired, broken old man. He'd lost
everything that ever meant anything to him in this world, and worst of all, he'd thrown most of it
away with his own two hands.
And just like that, the rest of the anger Dean had been harboring, all the ill will he felt towards his father, it was gone.

Just like that.

Gone.

"Dad. Look, you fucked up. A lot. But Sammy and me? We turned out ok. We did. And the thing is, I do forgive you. Because life is too short, and you just never know what tomorrow's gonna be, and maybe it's selfish, but I have to let go of the anger I feel for you. Because hanging on to it only hurts me in the end."

John's hands slipped away from his face, and he stared at Dean with surprise in his eyes.

"I mean it. I'm letting it go. It's not worth it."

"Thank you," John said shakily, "it's more than I had any right to expect from you."

Dean nodded.

"But I have something for you." He reached down beside him and lifted something from the bench, and Dean's heart dropped to his feet, recognizing the white cover immediately.

"I've read this six or seven times now. It's very well written. Sammy gave it to me. Said if I had any hope of understanding you, this book was key."

Dean shook his head, biting his bottom lip.

"So I read it. The first time, I felt kinda angry, but then I made myself read it again. And again. By the fourth time, I finally got it."

Putting his hands on the table, Dean started to stand. He'd given John his ten minutes. Bobby was waiting and there was no reason to stay.

John reached across the table, grabbing Dean's hand in his own, grip tight and unyielding.

"Let me go, Dad," Dean hissed, ignoring the curious stares from the other inmates and their visitors. A guard stepped forward, ready to intervene.

"Please, Dean, please let me explain. Please," John pleaded.

Dean froze, stuck between sitting and running, with his father holding his hand as tightly as he could. He looked into his father's eyes, expecting to see disgust and disdain, regretting his confession of forgiveness already, but there was nothing in John's eyes but regret, pain and -

\textit{Love}.\!

His breath stuttered in his lungs as Dean was transported back to 1983, sitting on his father's lap while Mary smiled and offered him the blanket wrapped bundled in her arms.

A tiny face stared curiously up at him, big dark eyes framed by long lashes.

"That's it, Dean," John said softly, rearranging his little hands to support his brother's neck. "Look at him looking at you. He knows you. Say hello to Sammy, Dean."

"Hi, Sammy," Dean whispered to the baby, smiling as Sammy gripped his finger in his tiny hand. He
turned, looking up at his dad, chocolate brown eyes warm and full of love for the boys in his lap.

And it was the same now; the expression on John's face, eyes warm, full of love for Dean, even as they were tempered with the pain of years thrown away, of love lost, and Dean dropped weakly back onto the bench, unable to pull his eyes from his father's face.

"Have you read the book?"

Dean nodded.

"How much of it's true?" John asked softly.

"Um. Right up to…" Dean sighed, scrubbing at his face with a shaking hand. "Uh, the part where I - where David -" he corrected, "cheats on Carver. Carver leaves. End of that chapter. Everything after that, Cas made up."

"Sam told me what really happened. That you were gonna look for him. And then I - I -," John stammered.

"It's ok, Dad," Dean said tiredly.

"No, it's not. It will never be. I almost killed you! And I will never, as long as I live, be able to fix that, or make it right, but I can give you one thing, I can give you something. Your brother came to see me yesterday."

Dean stiffened.

"He told me what happened. He feels guilty as hell, and he should, but Dean - Dean if I can give you anything, I can give you this." He pushed the book across the table. "Find him. Go to him, wherever he is."

"What? What are you, what are you talking about?" Dean asked, eyes wide.

"This boy, man, this Castiel? Dean, he's your Mary. He's your Mary."

His jaw dropped. He couldn't breathe. John stared at him from across the table, his expression so open, so honest, and Dean knew he meant every word. And just like that, Dean was crying, tears running in streams down his face. He cried and cried and cried, barely noticing when John got up to get some tissues from the guard, barely aware of his father sitting down next to him and pulling him into his arms.

"It's ok, son, it's ok. Let it out. Let it all go. I got ya," John whispered in his ear, holding him close and rubbing his back. "Let it go. God knows you've earned it."

Dean clung to his father, shaking and sobbing. "What do I do, Dad? What do I do?" he sobbed into his father's chest.

"You find him. You move Heaven and Earth and you find him. Ok?" Nodding, Dean sniffled loudly, and John softly chuckled. "Lift your head for me, ok, kiddo?"

Dean looked up, and John used the tissues to wipe his face. A matron stopped at their table with a kindly smile and a warm washcloth. "Here, Johnny, this'll help, hon," she said softly. "Ain't the first time we've had tears in the visitor's room, won't be the last." She gently ruffled Dean's hair as she walked away.
"Thanks, Kate," John called after her, and she waved. "You ok?"

"Will be," Dean sniffled, sitting up all the way. "Wow, I'm a mess."

"It's all good."

He sniffled again, looking up at his dad, and taking in John's kind smile. All these years, and just like that, all his anger, all of it—it was over. He was hit with a pang of sadness, remembering Bobby's words. "How long do you have, Dad?" he asked quietly.


"No, I mean, Bobby told me…"

"Told you what?" John asked, eyebrow raised. His face broke into a grin. "Old fart told ya I was dyin' didn't he?"

Dean nodded.

"That ass. Guess he figured it was the only way to get you in here, but I'm fine, Dean. Actually better these days, since I don't drink anymore."

"Well ain't he would've come in without some kinda motivation, right, Dean?" Bobby said, plopping down across from them.

"He's right," Dean said quietly. "Guess I can't even be mad about that."

"Bobby Singer, you shrewd old bastard."

"You're welcome," Bobby retorted drily.

The guards announced that visiting hours were over, and the three men stood. John pulled Dean into another tight hug.

"Merry Christmas, kiddo. Come back and see me sometime? Maybe with Castiel?"

"Yeah, Dad, I'll come back. Merry Christmas. And I'm um, I'm glad you're not dying. I'm glad. I am."

"Thanks kid." John let Dean go, but clasped his shoulders for a moment, just staring at him. "And thank you for raising Sammy. You shouldn't have had to, but you did a great job. You should be proud. And don't be too hard on him. He's hurting, Dean. He's hurting real bad."

Dean nodded. "Ok. I'll see you."

"See you around, Robert," John grinned, offering his hand.

"spect so. Take care, John."

John scooped his copy of *Painted Angels* off the table, and turned and smiled one last time, then let the guard lead him away.

Dean was very quiet on the ride home, lost in his own thoughts. Bobby parked the car behind the Roadhouse, and invited Dean for dinner. Dean agreed, but asked for some time and Bobby nodded.
Back in the firehouse, Dean flopped onto the couch, turning the events of the day around and around in his mind, and an hour went by pretty quickly. He went to his room to gather his presents for Ellen, Bobby, Jo, and Benny.

His arms overloaded, he was walking out of the room when he caught the edge of his dresser, knocking his laptop bag to the floor.

"Shit!" he cursed, turning back and setting the presents on the bed. Dean knelt near the dresser, tossing pens and papers back into the bag.

*Painted Angels* slid out of the bag as he picked it up, and he stared down at the book. He picked it up, standing slowly, and opened the cover to the dedication page.

There was Cas's signature, in black ink, and a note. *Page 78, C. Novak.*

Dean thumbed through the pages, finding the passage quickly, his eyes widening as he read, and he could swear he heard Cas's voice reading the words to him.

"He stood and watched him move, paint stained, ratty blue jeans slung low on his hips. David moved gracefully, back and shoulder muscles rippling against the threadbare fabric of the stained black and red flannel he was wearing. He was beautiful, economy of movement and bare elegance, every part of his body involved in the painting process.

*I love him,* Carver thought unexpectedly, heart swelling with warmth. *I love him.*"

Underneath was a note, just a few words, and as Dean read them, his heart swelled, filled with a rush of love for the man that wrote them, and he tossed the book on his bed and ran from the room, the words still dancing before his eyes.

*And I still feel that way.* -Cas

Chapter End Notes

Linneart
Dean shoved into the Roadhouse, the bell on the door protesting his rough treatment. Several faces turned towards him.

"You alright, boy?" Bobby asked.

"I'm good. Really!" Dean said, with a big grin, "But I fucked up my car and I need to borrow one, 'cause it might be a while before I can fix mine."

"Uh, what for? What's going on, sweetie?" Ellen's eyes were kind.

"I need to go get Cas. Like right now. I can't wait."

A set of keys flew through the air, and he caught them easily. "Thanks, Jo!" he called happily, bounding back out the door. He found Jo's little red Mini Cooper about a block down from the firehouse.

Downtown traffic was pretty much nonexistent, as it was Christmas Day, and it only took Dean about fifteen minutes to get from the Roadhouse to the Inner Harbor. He found a spot in the parking garage, and shut off the car.

His heart was slamming against his ribcage. Dean sat for a moment, tapping restlessly on the steering wheel, trying to think of something to say, but his thoughts were too twisted and disjointed.

"Fuck it," he muttered, pulling the keys from the ignition. He'd figure it out on the elevator.

Dean walked quickly from the garage to the hotel lobby. He found the bank of elevators and pressed the up button, stepping into the first available car. The elevators were impressive, all glass, and he stared out at the harbor on the ride up to the 14th floor.

Dean sighed happily and leaned back against the wall. From that height, he could clearly see the snow coated Barnes and Noble. Christmas Day had dawned bright and cold in Charm City, Baltimore living up to its nickname as the snow layered over everything, making it look like some sort of confection.

The elevator dinged. He steeled himself, stepping off into the hallway. He found room 1402 just to his left, and knocked once. He adjusted his jacket, ran a hand through his hair, and swallowed a few times.

The door opened, but it wasn't Cas on the other side. It was a housekeeper, and she blinked up at him.

"Uh. Hello. I'm looking for Cas Novak?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. This room has been vacant since yesterday."

Dean stomach dropped, and he checked a crumpled piece of paper in his pocket. Cas had definitely written Room 1402 on it. "Oh. Ok. I'm sorry."

"No problem," she smiled, letting the door close again.
The ride back down to the lobby wasn't nearly as pleasant.

He found Jo's car in the garage and slid inside. Pulling the piece of paper from his pocket again, he dialed the number Cas had scrawled on it before coming to see him at school. Hard to believe that had just been a few weeks ago.

The phone rang once, going immediately to voicemail. He dialed three more times just to be sure. Dean didn't leave a message. He was starting to figure it out.

Cas had left. He'd fucked up, and panicked, and Cas had left.

Dean didn't know what to do, or who to call. He sat in the parking garage, in Jo's car, for ten minutes, holding his phone in his hand, staring off into space.

_Sam._

Sam would have Gabe's number. And Gabe would know where Cas was.

Thinking of Sam made Dean's stomach clench. He'd hit him. He'd hit his baby brother. He set his phone down on the passenger seat.

He needed to apologize to Sam, and he wasn't about to do that over the phone. He drove back to Remington, parked the Mini Cooper in front of the Roadhouse, and rushed into the restaurant.

"Jo, I need your car for a little longer. I've got to go down to D.C. to see -"

Sam was the only one in the dining room, frozen with a dirty plate hovering over a plastic dish bin.

"You're here."

"Well, yeah," Sam said quietly, "I didn't really have anywhere else to go." He moved the plate into the bin, and reached for another. "They're all next door at Benny's. I offered to clean up." He looked up at Dean, a flicker of fear in his eyes. "Not gonna hit me again, are you?"

Dean sighed. "No. I'm sorry about that." He looked at Sam's face then, really looked at him. There was an angry purple bruise on his jaw, and his nose was puffy and swollen. "Ouch. Did I do that?"

"Most of it. But Cas hit me, too." Sam dropped into a chair, dishes forgotten. "Not like I didn't deserve it."

"Cas hit you? Sammy -"

"No, Dean, I fucked up. I fucked up hard. You think I don't get that? I put my nose where it really didn't belong. I had no right. I get it. I get it." Sam yanked himself back out of the chair, grabbing at dishes and plunking them into the bin. Plates and glasses crashed against each other, and in the interest of saving Ellen's china, Dean moved around the table. He reached for Sam's hands and stilled them.

"Hey. Don't. C'mon. You and me need to talk. Ok? We need to talk." Sam stared down at the floor, hiding his eyes in his bangs. "You're not the only one who fucked up, ok? I owe you a huge apology, Sammy."

Sam snorted, but didn't look up.

"It's true. C'mon." Dean dragged Sam over to a booth and pushed his brother into it. "Want some coffee or something?"
"Yeah," Sam said quietly.

Dean walked across the restaurant to the bar, where Ellen had a carafe, mugs, plates, and pie. He slid everything onto a tray and brought it back to the booth.

Sam was still staring at the table, picking at a cuticle on his thumb.

"Look. I found some pie. God, I'm starving. I don't think I've eaten anything all day. Well, I did have breakfast. I just didn't keep it."

"We made a plate for you. Want me to go get it?"

"Maybe in a bit. Pie works for now, 'cause you know, pie." Dean poured two cups of coffee and slid one across the table to Sam. He cut himself a big wedge of pumpkin pie, and settled back into the booth.

Dean ate, and watched Sam dump entirely too much sugar in his mug with a big dollop of half and half. He looked down at his own cup of black coffee. "Yeah, that's still gross," he mumbled around a mouthful of pie.

"You're gross. Don't talk with your mouth full."

"Yes, Mom," Dean retorted sarcastically.

Sam's lips tilted in a half grin. They were quiet for a bit, as Dean finished his pie and coffee.

"I really do owe you an apology, Sam," Dean said quietly, pushing his plate towards the center of the table.

"No, you don't. I'm the one that screwed up here."

"You thought you were doing the right thing."

"Last time I checked, it wasn't the road to Heaven that was paved with good intentions."

"Still."

"No, don't make excuses for me. I meddled and it backfired." Sam poured another cup of coffee, loading it with sugar and creamer.

"Sammy," Dean sighed, "You know, sometimes I forget."

"Forget what?"

"That what happened to me happened to you too."

"I'm fine."

"No you're not. You're as fucked up as I am. You just hide it better." Sam snorted derisively. "It's true. We probably both need a lifetime of therapy."

"Right. I'll go if you go."

"Ok," Dean said seriously.

That got Sam's attention. He set the spoon to the side and finally lifted his eyes from the tabletop.
"You're serious?"

"Very."

"Huh."

"Sam, don't you think maybe this ploy to get me and Cas back together had something to do with how miserable you are? And I'm not calling you out on it, not like that," he said, raising his hands placatingly to try and stave off Sam's growing anger, "But for all that you say I'm unhappy, you're not happy either. I know it. I can see it.

"And it's like I said, sometimes I forget that it was you that watched that whole thing go down. I forget it was you that sat at my bed for weeks. I forget it was you that went through physical therapy with me. I think at some point I just started taking you for granted. And I'm sorry for that. I am."

Sam's eyes dropped back down to the table, and he became very interested in his coffee cup again.

"I'm trying to understand, because I know what you did, the text messages and all that, I know that you weren't being malicious. I know you were really doing what you thought would help. I know that, Sammy. I know it was hard and I can't even -"

"No, you're right," Sam murmured. "You have no idea what it was like. None." He sighed and pushed his mug away. "You have no idea what it was like to run into the damn firehouse just in time to see Dad slam that board into your head. Or what it was like to see you after, with all the tubes and wires and your head all wrapped up. To be eighteen years old and be told that your big brother, who's more of a parent than a sibling, is likely not going to make it through the night. So yeah, when you say you can't even imagine? Damn right you can't."

"Then help me understand. You never talk to me about this. Ever."

"Right," Sam scoffed, "Because Dean Winchester is such a big talker. Because you tell me how you feel, and what's wrong, and because you're so goddamn in tune with your emotions? I like that. Talk to me, Sammy," he mocked.

"Ok. Guess I deserved that."

"Why aren't you getting mad?!" Sam slammed his fist down on the tabletop, causing all the dishes to jump. "You should be mad at me, call me Samantha, and walk out that door!"

"I'm done being angry."

"Well, I'm not! I'm furious! I am so sick of - we had a good life! We had a good life, Dean, and Dad came in and burned it all down, and goddamnit!" Sam stood, and stalked back to the main table, resuming his earlier busing duties, slamming dishes and glasses into the plastic bin, "Dad burned it all down around us. It was so perfect. You had Cas, I had Sarah, we had lives, you had a career, and he burned it all down!"

Dean stood quietly, and walked behind Sam, reaching around him to take the plate from his fingers and set it gently in the dish bin, then he turned Sam around and pulled him into his arms.

"He burned it all down!" Sam sobbed, dropping his head onto Dean's shoulder. His whole frame shook with sobs, but he let Dean pull him close, and he let Dean hold him through the worst of it.

"I'm sorry, Sammy," Dean murmured into his hair. "I'm so sorry."
His apology only served to make Sam cry harder, and it wasn't long before Dean's shoulder was soaked with tears. It took a while for Sam to calm down, but Dean was glad. Sam needed this. He needed to let it out.

"Hey, c'mon, let's sit down."

Sam nodded and let Dean pull him back to the booth. They sat on the same side this time, with Sam safely nestled against the wall and his brother.

"How come you're not mad?" Sam sniffled. "You should be mad."

"I let it go."

"Since when do you do that? Way too emotionally mature for you, Dean."

"I dunno, man. I went to see Dad today, and I just - I just decided I was done. I'm tired of being mad. I'm tired of hating the world and my situation. I need to find peace with this. So I said fuck it. I'm done being mad."

"Wow," Sam said quietly, leaning into Dean's shoulder. "Just like that. You're just gonna forget everything he did to you - to us?"

"It's not worth it, Sam. What good does it do me to hang on to all that? What's the point of spending the rest of my life being mad at some old man who threw his whole life away? It's not like he isn't aware of it. It's not like he isn't really sorry."

"I know that. I've been going to see him pretty regularly for the last year. I know he's sincere. I just didn't expect you to forgive and forget so quickly."

"Just no point. There's no point in hanging on to it."

"Wow. Damn." Sam nudged Dean's shoulder. "I'm impressed."

"And you're not mad at me?"

"Nah. You should be mad at me. I'm the one that messed up." Sam sniffled again, reaching for a napkin to mop his face with.

"I'm over it. Although, you were right about one thing."

"Yeah?" Sam asked, sitting up and looking over at Dean.

"Yeah." Dean scrubbed a hand over his face. "You were right about Cas, about me still being in love with him."

"Huh."

"So that's where I went. I borrowed Jo's car and went to the Hyatt, but he'd already checked out."

"Oh. Yeah, he um. He was pretty upset. Gabe and I went to go talk to him, but he was already packed and ready to go. He went back to France yesterday."

Dean's stomach dropped. "Fuck."

"I'm sorry, Dean. That's my fa -"
"Shuttup. Let me think."

Cas went back to France. Cas was gone.

I need to fix it. I messed it up and I didn't get the chance last time, and I need to fix it. I need him.

I love him.

"Sammy? I need your help."

---

"So let me get this straight." Gabe leaned back into the couch and steepled his fingers. "You completely rejected my brother, and now you want me to help you get him back?"

"Uh. Yeah." Dean stared down at his hands, feeling his face flame. "I know I screwed up, Gabe. Just - I need the chance to fix it. I need your help."

"Huh."

"C'mon, Gabe, give Dean a chance. Please?"

"I dunno. You really broke him, Dean-o. I don't know if I'm willing to be a part of him possibly getting hurt worse. He is my baby brother after all. How would you feel if it was Sam?" Gabe looked at Sam meaningfully. "You wouldn't willingly hurt your little brother, would you?"

Dean sighed, and dropped heavily into one of the firehouse's recliners. "No."

The doorbell buzzed, and Sam disappeared down the steps, coming back a few moments later with a stack of pizzas.

"Buttering me up with food ain't gonna work fellas," Gabe said pleasantly, helping himself to a piece just the same. "So do you have some kind of plan here? Or do you just want to fly to Old Paree and wing it? Do either of you knuckleheads even have a passport?"

"I do," said Sam defensively, "And I've got connections in D.C. that could help me get one quickly for Dean."

"Tell me you have some sort of plan, Dean?"

"Just gonna tell him the truth," Dean mumbled, "And beg him to forgive me. Do whatever it takes to make it right - if he even wants me anymore." The doubts snuck back in, and Dean wondered what Cas would think of him now. He'd said he wanted to get to know Dean again, but what if he didn't like what he found?

What if the 'new' Dean was just too broken? What if Cas didn't want to take the time to -

"Earth to Dean Winchester," Gabe said drily. "Where'd you go just now?"

"Uh. Was just thinking." He scrubbed his face with his hand. "Maybe you're right, Gabe." Dean stood and headed for his bedroom. "Maybe this was just a bad idea."

A hand reached out and wrapped around his arm, pulling him back. He turned, and found Sam's eyes on him.

"No. You're not walking away." Sam's grip on his arm tightened briefly. "Don't do this. You and I both know how much you'll regret it. Isn't it worth it, even if he says no, to know you did everything
you could to fix it?" Dean nodded. "Then do it. Find him. Fix it."

"I still love him," Dean said softly, turning to look at Gabe, "I still love him, and I want to fix it. Please. Please help me, Gabe."

Gabe sighed. "Ok, fine. I'm in. Don't make me regret it."

Dean smiled. "I won't. Promise."

"Good. Get me a beer and sit down, and let's figure all this shit out. Do you have a plan? Besides the groveling, I mean."

Dean handed Gabe a beer and sat down on the edge of the recliner. Sam grabbed a piece of pizza and plopped down next to Gabe.

"Uh. Like I said. I pretty much just planned on finding him and then figuring out what to say when I -"

"No."

"What?"

"I said no. You need something big. A grand gesture if you will. You fucked up, Dean."

"I know that, Gabe."

"So you gotta do something big. Trust me."

"Well, I don't exactly have something big money, Gabe. I'm just a friggin' teacher. It's going to drain my savings just getting over there."

"I have some in my savings, Dean. I'll help." Sam leaned forward and grabbed another piece of pizza. When he sat back, his leg was pressed against Gabe's. They were literally sitting right next to each other, on a couch that was built for at least eight people.

_Huh_, Dean thought. _Interesting_.

"No, Sammy, if I can just get over there, I can figure something out."

"But I have some money, and I want to help."

"I can handle it, Sam -"

"Dammit, Dean!"

"Shut up the fuck up, both of you, Jesus." Gabe shook his head. "Boys, I've agreed to help. And to that end, I'll foot the bill. Uh uh uh," he cut Dean off, "My rules. I have way more money than you two could ever hope to have."

Sam's eyes widened. "Just how much are you talking?"

"Sammy my boy, in my case money is seriously no object."

Dean and Sam both stared at Gabe.

"What? I'm successful. Now, start pitching me ideas, Dean-o, and let's see what happens. Ok?"
"Uh -"

"Unless you're not serious about wanting my brother back."

"No, I'm serious. Very serious."

"Good. Then let's figure this out."

He'd arrived at DeGaulle early Christmas morning. His old friend René Segal was waiting for him. He dropped Cas at his small one bedroom flat near Rue Montorgueil and told him the place was his for as long as he liked. Cas had gone to bed almost immediately, exhausted by the emotional upheaval and last minute travel of the previous day.

At 5p.m., he was awake again, jet-lagged and irritable. Cas bundled up and went out for a walk, looking into closed storefronts and warmly lit homes with merry people celebrating inside.

He felt so alone.

It was worse this time. 2001 had been bad enough, but to be there a second time, because he'd been rejected a second time, hurt more and cut deeper than he'd ever imagined.

Castiel found an open wine shop - it was France after all - and he purchased several bottles and took them back to the flat. The rest of Christmas passed in an alcohol soaked haze, followed by an indulgent cycle of self-loathing and pastries the following morning.

He spent the next several days alternating between drinking and wandering the city. Cas avoided art museums at all cost; but frequented the wine shops.

René, long since matured from their alcohol soaked youth, did his best to bring Cas around, dragging him out to small concerts and parties, even a fashion show, introducing him to a never-ending string of gorgeous people, and in particular, gorgeous men.

It was tempting, to be sure, the idea of taking home one of the beautiful, unattached twenty-somethings René paraded past him. And it would be refreshing, perhaps, to lose himself in unattached, one-night only hedonism, but Cas always left René's festivities alone; letting himself back into the dark flat and settling into bed with a glass of wine and his broken heart.

Gabe called. Many times. And each time, Cas ignored it. His brother left more and more creative voice mails, but by New Year's Eve, they'd taken on a slightly desperate tone.

"Look, I get it. You're hurt. You're upset. You have every right to be. But you promised me you wouldn't just up and disappear. You promised, Cassie. Please call me. Please."

He didn't call him back.

New Year's Eve was cold, but it didn't seem to slow the Parisians down. There were loud parties, spilling out into the street below his flat, and he stood in the window at midnight, indulging in an entire bottle of Dom Pérignon, watching the fireworks over the rooftops.
Castiel tumbled into bed around three in the morning, after jotting down some incoherent notes for his next book. He knew he'd throw them out in the morning.

The next day, New Year's Day, it was well after noon when he finally dragged himself from bed and took a shower. He dressed warmly, and wandered out into the city for breakfast. He was in the marketplace when he looked up and saw him.

A man, just about Dean's height, wearing a reddish-brown leather jacket and a very similar hairstyle, and his heart lurched hopefully, but he was gone before Cas could get close enough to have a good look.
Sighing, and mentally berating himself, he paid for his pastries, cheese, and fruit, and headed back to the flat.

Cas spent most of that day in the dark, as the sun went down, staring out the windows at Paris.

He closed his eyes, and let the memories he'd been fighting carry him away, remembering the early beautiful days in the firehouse, when everything was so sweet and fresh and new. He remembered their first Christmas, and Dean surprising him with the tattoo. He remembered the wonderful summer in Ocean City. He remembered just a few nights prior, curled on the piano bench while Dean sang to him. Making love for the first time in twelve years. Dean's sweet face in the early light of morning.

Castiel remembered everything.

A knock on his door startled him out of his reverie. He was halfway through a bottle of Bordeaux at that point, and wobbled slightly on his way to the door.

"Well, hello there," Gabe said pleasantly, leaning against the door frame. "Good to see you're still alive, since you've apparently forgotten how to use a cell phone."

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"Not important. Gonna invite me in?"

"Do I have to?"

"Nope," Gabe said, pushing past him. "I'm good." He plopped down on the couch in the dark flat, eyes sweeping over the array of empty wine bottles. "Having a party? Or is this how you spent your week?"

Cas sighed and shut the door. "I didn't invite you here. Leave me alone."

"Nope," Gabe said again. "Bundle up. We're going out."

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"I will raise all holy hell if you don't get your ass bundled up and come out with me. I will get the police called on you, trust me."

"Fine! And when we get back, you leave. Ok?"

"Ok."

Twenty minutes later, a very irritated Cas let Gabe hail them a cab, and he got in, but didn't say two words to his brother. The night was cold, but Paris was so beautifully lit, he couldn't help but stare out the windows. Even now, even back in 2001, the beauty of the city managed to cut through the bleakness of his situation.

"Where are we going?" He asked quietly, tugging his gloves on.

"Sightseeing," Gabe smiled.

They pulled up to a curb, and Gabe handed the cabby a large pile of Euros, likely more than the fare, and pulled Cas out of the cab.

"The Eiffel Tower? Really, Gabe?"
"Hey, it's cool. See?" Gabe waved his hand towards it. "Look, it's all lit up." He pulled out his phone, typed something, and shoved it back in his pocket. "C'mon." Gabe grabbed Cas's arm and started pulling him along.

"I really don't want to do this. Can't we just go back? I'll make you dinner. It's cold out here."

Gabe didn't seem to listening, the firm grip on his arm not loosening a bit.

There was music coming from somewhere, a piano played, and the closer he got to the Tower, the more he could make out.

"Gabe, I really just want to -"

Castiel stopped dead in his tracks. There was a voice singing along with the piano, and it was so familiar. He stumbled. He'd know that voice anywhere.

His breath caught in his lungs, and Cas looked towards the base of the Tower. There was a piano set up, and several violin and cello players.

His eyes widened; the voice, the man sitting at the piano -

"Dean?"

"Gabe says they're here."

Breathe in. I can do this. Breathe out.

Dean swallowed, flexed his hands in fingerless gloves, and laid his fingers on the keys.

Sam patted his back, and disappeared into the crowd, an unseen, but still felt support.

He played the intro, a newer song he'd been practicing for the last four days, until he was sure he had the whole thing. The first part would just be him, and then the strings around him would join in.

Grand gesture, Gabe had said. He hoped this did it. He was sitting under the Eiffel Tower, in Paris, France, about to perform a song for the man he loved in front of hundreds of people.

If that wasn't a grand gesture, he didn't know what was.

Scanning the crowd for Cas one last time, but not seeing him, Dean started to sing.

"Six on the second hand till New Year's resolutions, there's just no question what this man should do. Take all the time lost, all the days that I cost, take what I took and give it back to you."

Still no Cas, but he kept singing. His heart was pounding, but he took a deep breath and launched into the chorus.

"All this time we were waiting for each other. All this time I was waiting for you. We got all these words, can't waste them on another. So I'm straight in a straight line running back to you."

There was movement to his left, but he kept going, as the violins and cellos joined in, and for a moment, at least, he kind of felt like a rock star.

"I don't know what day it is, I had to check the paper. I don't know the city but it isn't home. You say I'm lucky to love something that loves me, but I'm torn as I could be wherever I roam."
Cas. He stood just to his left, Gabe on one side, and Sam on the other.

"All this time we were waiting for each other. All this time I was waiting for you. Got all these words, can't waste them on another. So I'm straight in a straight line running back to you."

His eyes met Cas's.

"Oh, running back to you. Oh, running back to you."

There were tears running down Cas's face now, and Dean could feel his own, and neither one of them could look away. The tempo of the song picked up, the strings around him soaring with the music.

"Oh, I would travel so far. I would travel so far. To get back where you are."

He grinned, and launched into the last part of the song, never taking his eyes off of Cas.

"All this time we were waiting for each other. All this time I was waiting for you. Got all this love, can't waste it on another, so I'm straight in a straight line running back to you. Straight in a straight line running back to you."

He stood, and walked around the piano, reaching his hands out and taking Cas's in his own, as he sang the last line of the song.

"Straight in a straight line running back to you."

"Dean -" Cas whispered.

"Hey, Cas," Dean smiled, and sniffled, tears still flowing.

"You're here, you're really here."

"Yeah."

"You got on a plane for me."

"Yeah."

"You hate flying," Cas said, voice cracking.

"Yeah, I really do. I hate it," Dean agreed.

"You're here," Cas said again, so quietly Dean almost missed it. "How?"

"Uh, Gabe, he's like, filthy rich or something. Did you know he produced Dr. Sexy?"

"And porn," Cas added, eyes still fixed on Dean.

"Yeah, that too," Dean chuckled.

"Is this, are you? Why are you here?"

"I want to fix this. I want to fix us. I messed up. Hell, I am messed up. But you said you wanted to get to know me again. Is that offer still open?"

Cas smiled, and nodded. "Yes, of course," he said, as more tears fell.
"Ok. Good. Because I still love you. I'm scared to death, here, you gotta know...I'm afraid you won't like who I am now. But it's worth taking that chance, right? Please tell me I'm right about that at least."

Cas reached up, hooked his hand behind Dean's neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

"Yes, you're right." He pressed their foreheads together, "You're so right."

"So apparently, our grand scheme is off to a good start. How 'bout you let me buy you dinner, handsome?" Gabe grinned up at Sam.

Sam nodded. "Yeah, sure, why not?"

"Well, damn, don't act like I'm forcing you or something."

"Gabe, I gotta ask you something," Sam ran a hand through his hair, and stared down at the other man, as they walked away from Cas and Dean. Not like those two needed anymore help from them now, seeing as how they were completely wrapped around each other and oblivious to the rest of the world.

"Ok, kiddo, what do you want to know?"

"You've been flirting with me since I've known you, and Christmas Eve, when Cas said you'd been in love with me from day one - was that the truth?"

"Maybe. C'mon, Sammy, ain't like you're interested in me. I'm too old for you, for one, and you're not into guys, so I'm just going to have to content myself with -"

Sam cut Gabe off, leaning down to kiss him. The older man tasted like candy, no big surprise really, and Gabe reached up, ran a hand through Sam's hair and pulled him closer.

When they finally separated, Gabe was flushed, and for once in his life, speechless.

Sam grinned.

"God, you talk too much. Buy me dinner. We're in Paris, let's have some fun!"

"You're serious. Not messing with me here, are you Sammy? I don't think I could take that."

Reaching down, Sam took Gabe's hand.

"I'm serious," he said quietly.


All This Time by One Republic

Art by Linneart

Please bear in mind that I have never been to France. I relied on research and personal accounts.
"So, now what?" Dean asked softly, unwilling to move out of the shelter of Cas's arms.

Cas thumbed a few tears off his cheek. "You're still crying," he murmured.

"So are you," Dean smiled, returning the favor.

"Well, I guess maybe we should go talk? I don't know. I didn't expect to see you again."

"Cas, I'm so sorry. I am, I s-swear." His voice broke, as more tears flowed.

"Shh, it's not all your fault. It's not. Please don't try and take all the blame." He wiped a few more tears from Dean's face. "Are you ok? You can't stop crying."

Dean sniffled. "It happens. I uh, I cry kinda easy these days."

"It's cold out here. Let's go somewhere warm. Come back to the flat, and I'll make you dinner. And we can talk. Ok?"

"Ok." He sniffled again and swiped at the tears on his cheeks. "We should let Gabe and Sam -" He looked around. "Never mind," he smiled, watching as the two of them piled into a cab, hands joined. "I think they're good."

Cas followed his gaze and shook his head. "It's about damn time." He wrapped his hand tight around Dean's. "C'mon. Let's get our own cab."

Dean let Cas lead him back out to the street, where he hailed a cab and opened the door without ever letting go of Dean's hand. He gave the driver instructions in flawless French, then leaned back against the seat.

They were both very quiet on the ride back to the flat, but never let go of the other's hand. In twenty minutes, they arrived at the building. Cas led him up three flights of stairs, and into a small hallway.

The flat itself was fairly small, but airy and clean, despite the rather telling amount of empty wine bottles lined up along the counter. Dean didn't say a word about the bottles. There was a time when his preferred method of avoidance was drowning his brain in alcohol. Who was he to judge how Cas killed the pain? Although, it cut him deep to realize he was the reason for the long line of empties.

And just like that, the tears flared up again, but he turned his face away from where Cas was puttering around the kitchen, getting things together for their dinner.

He felt so small. So small, and so scared, fear pushing against his throat and making it hard to breathe. What if Cas didn't want him? What if he was just being kind until he could send him away again?

"Bathroom?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"Just down the hall. Are you ok?"

"Yeah, I'm good, I'm go -"
Cas was there, and pulling him into his arms. "You're upset. What's wrong?"

Dean shook his head and tried to push away, but Cas didn't let him go.

"The only way this is going to work is if we talk to each other. What's going on? Why are you getting so upset again?"

"I'm not, I'm fine," he muttered, staring down at the floor as he tried to pull away from Cas, but the other man tightened his hold.

"Dean, you've got to talk to me. You didn't come all this way just to pretend you're fine, when you're obviously not."

"You must hate me," Dean said quietly, embarrassed by the fresh wave of tears and the way his voice cracked.

Cas cupped Dean's chin, tilting his head up. "I could never hate you," he said softly, his eyes sad, "How could you ever think that? I could never hate you."

Dean made a horribly embarrassing sound, a mutated cross between a sob and a whimper, and the tears came faster, blurring his vision. Cas pulled him down onto the couch, holding him tightly and carding his fingers through Dean's hair.

"It's ok. Cry if you need to. I won't think any less of you. Believe me."

"I'm so fucked up, Cas," Dean sniffled.

"We're all fucked up. All of us." He kissed the top of Dean's head. "I told you I wanted to get to know you again. I meant it. I want to know everything about you. Can you stay? Or do you need to go back home?"

"I'm actually on vacation for a long time. Anna and me, we both had a lot of vacation days. I've never taken a day off in the five years I've been teaching, so I'm using up a month. I can stay until the twentieth." He sniffled again, and Cas handed him a tissue. "Also, Gabe handed me his American Express card and told me I could do whatever I wanted with it."

Cas chuckled. "Wow. He must really like you."

"Honestly? I think it was just so he could get in Sam's pants." Dean smiled, and wiped at his face with the tissue.

"Seems to be working for him," Cas chuckled. "So we have time and money. This is a good thing. Tonight, though, I think we should feed you and get you to bed. Where are you staying?"

"The George V."

"Holy shit. Gabe spared no expense."

"Yeah, well, like I said. I think he was mainly trying to get in Sam's pants." Dean laughed, and wiped the last of his tears from his eyes. "I didn't bring much. Just some clothes." His stomach rumbled loudly, and they both grinned.

"Let me get us something to eat. And then we'll talk. Ok?"

"Yeah. I am gonna hit the bathroom though."
Cas nodded, and busied himself pulling things from cabinets.

The bath was just as small as the rest of the place, with an ancient claw foot tub, and old fixtures, but it was quaint, and clean, and Dean found he didn't miss the luxury of the hotel he'd spent the last two days in, losing his mind while Gabe tried desperately to find Castiel. The suite Gabe had gotten for them was as large as the firehouse, but it had felt so confining to Dean, as anxious as he was, and although he spent those two days practicing the song on the keyboard Gabe had somehow obtained, it had been pure torture to wait, afraid that Gabe wouldn't find him, and he'd have to just turn around and go home.

Dean could feel his thoughts trying to spiral out of control again, felt the fear rising, and he shoved it down.

Cas wasn't throwing him out. Cas wanted to talk. Cas seemed happy that he was there.

He took a deep breath, held it, released, and did it again. Five breaths later, he was calmer, and he dampened a washcloth, pressing the coolness against his swollen eyelids. He washed his face, and then his hands.

Dean frowned at his appearance in the mirror. His eyes were red, the lids swollen and puffy. His nose was red. His skin was blotchy. He was a mess.

There was a tap on the door. "Are you ok?" Cas asked.

Opening the door, he nodded. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Ok. I've got some supper for us. It's not much. I haven't really been eating a whole lot since I've been here, but I've got some cold salmon, fruit, cheese, and bread. And wine. Plenty of wine."

"Sounds good. I'm not all that hungry, to be honest."

"Me neither. But it's there all the same. Come," he reached for Dean's hand, "Sit with me, and have a glass of wine. Ok?"

"Ok."

Cas led Dean back to the couch, and handed him a glass of wine. "Merlot. Is that ok?"

"It's fine, Cas, I'm not that picky," he said, reaching for the wine. They both filled plates, and ate quietly. Dean had a lot on his mind, and so many things he wanted to say, but the silence prevailed.

"Are you staying here tonight, or will you need a ride back to the hotel?"

"Uh. I don't know. All my stuff is there, but truthfully, not sure I want to see what Gabe and Sam might have gotten up to."

"That's a very good point," Cas said with a grin. "You can stay here."

"Yeah. Um. I'm not sure, I mean, that just -"

"I'm not talking about sex, Dean. Neither one of us are ready for that yet. We need to get to know each other again, and I think sex would just complicate and confuse things."

An incredible rush of relief filled Dean. "You're right."

"I'll take the couch, then."
"No, it's your place. I'll take the couch."

"Dean, you're too tall for this couch. I'll take the couch."

"Cas -"

"Are we really going to argue about this? About who's taking the couch? It's not a great way to start this thing off, is it?"

Dean shook his head and grinned. "Yeah. I feel pretty stupid."

"It's ok." Cas patted his hand. "Go on. I've got sweats and stuff in the top drawer. You're exhausted, I can tell. Go sleep it off."

"Ok." Dean stood and stretched. "Goodnight, Cas."

"Goodnight. I'll see you in the morning." He smiled at Dean, and reached up to squeeze his hand. "Sleep well."

"You, too."

The stared at each other a moment more, and Dean had to physically shake himself and force his feet to take him to the bedroom, where he shut the door behind him. He dropped down onto the bed, staring out the window at a starry sky.

Morning dawned bright and cold, and Cas was out before Dean woke, fetching more fresh pastries and fruit. He called Gabe, but the call went directly to voicemail. Cas sighed. They needed Dean's bag and he wanted to ask his brother about his credit card. He was sure Gabe had meant it when he said Dean could use it for whatever, and Cas wasn't exactly hurting for money, but if they had almost a month, and unlimited funds, well, Cas had some very good ideas about how he and Dean could get to know each other again.

Dean was still asleep when he returned to the flat. He set his purchases on the counter, and went to check on him.

Sunlight filled the small bedroom, and Dean was laying on top of the covers, sprawled on his stomach with his arms tucked under the pillow. He looked sweet, and so innocent, and Cas stood and watched him, watched his face, and the funny little expressions he made as he slept.

Once again, Cas found himself mourning all the lost years, all the days and hours lost with this man by his side.

No, he told himself firmly, *he's here now. It's time to make new memories.*

He pulled the door shut again, and went to the kitchen to make coffee. He was on his second cup when Dean finally got up, dressed in a pair of Cas's sweats and the black tee he'd had on the night before. His hair was sticking up in a thousand different directions, and he rubbed at his eyes as he made his way to the kitchen.

Dean took the cup of coffee Cas offered him, smiling gratefully as he took his first sip. "Mornin'," he said with a smile. "Guess I was pretty tired, huh?"

"Almost ten hours? I'd say so. You must still be jet lagged. How many days have you been here?"

"Two, no three now. Gabe couldn't find you at first."
"I should have answered my phone, I guess."

Dean snorted, "Yeah, he might have cussed you out a few times over the last couple days."

"It's funny. I thought I saw you yesterday. There was a man in the market, with your build, and hairstyle, wearing what I thought was the jacket I bought you."

"Uh. That was me."

"It was?"

"Yeah. I saw you, too. But I didn't want you to see me yet. Not until I could do the thing with the piano."

"Why? I would have been just as happy to see you then," Cas said softly. Dean blushed, pink blooming across his cheekbones.

"Well, Gabe said I fucked up and that I needed to do something big to win you back."

Cas felt an instant rush of anger. "That's not true. You aren't the only one that messed this up, and I would have been just as happy to see you yesterday, and - god, Dean, don't get me wrong, I loved that you did the concert, and sang to me, but it wasn't necessary."

"Cas, this whole situation is my fault," Dean said softly, picking at a spot on the table.

"No, it's not," Cas insisted.

"Yeah it is. I'm the one who said I didn't love you. I'm the one who sent you away. That's on me. And that's where this whole thing starts. I'm the one that needs to beg for forgiveness here."

"Dean, that is such a load of self-indulgent bullshit, I kind of want to slap you across your perfect face."

Dean looked up at him, surprise in his pretty green eyes. "I don't understand."

"No, I don't understand. I don't understand why you are always so quick to take the blame. I don't understand why you are so goddamn hard on yourself. Can't we just agree that we both fucked up, and that we both need to fix this?" He reached across the table and took Dean's hand. "Trust me, I messed up, too. It's not all your fault. It will never be all your fault."

Dean didn't seem to know how to respond to that. He just sat quietly, staring down at the table top.

"I'm going to get a shower. Gabe didn't answer his phone, so when I'm done, I'll take you the hotel to get your bag, and then we'll figure out how we're going to spend the next several weeks. I have some ideas, and I'd like your input."

Sam answered the door, clad only in a robe and a big grin. Dean felt his cheeks heat when he let him in, especially after he saw that Gabe was wearing the same thing.

"Ugh, I don't even want to know. Just gonna get my stuff." He walked quickly across the suite to his own room, found his bag and packed his things. When he came back out, Cas was on the balcony
with Gabe, and they seemed deep in conversation. Sam had found a pair of jeans and a tee and was sitting on the couch.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"Um, I'm good. I'm ok." He looked out at Gabe. "So you and Gabe, huh?"

"Yeah," Sam smiled, blushing, "Yeah. It's good. We're good."

"Cool. I'm uh, I'm happy for you."

"Thanks. You and Cas?"

"We got a lot to talk about. But I'll find my own way home. I'm gonna stay here with him, and we'll talk, and maybe things will work out. I don't know, but-" He stared out at the balcony, and Cas turned, their eyes met, and he smiled, his blue eyes twinkling.

"But?"

"But I'm hopeful. I'm very hopeful," he said softly.

"You should go to some of the museums while you're here, if you can. The Louvre especially."

"That would be cool."

Sam pulled his lanky frame out of the couch and surprised Dean by wrapping him in a bear hug. "Dean, let yourself be happy. Let yourself have this. Ok?"

Dean nodded against Sam's shoulder, and let himself take comfort from Sam's embrace. He was still so uncertain, so unsure, and Sam could read him like a book.

"I will. I promise. I want this to work."

"Then don't let yourself burn it down again. Be open, be honest, tell him everything. He's not going to run. If there's one thing I'm sure about in this world, it's that Cas loves you with every cell of his being. You just have to let him in. Please. Do something good for yourself for once. Ok?"

"Ok," Dean whispered, tears burning behind his closed lids. "I promise."

“Are you going to hit me? You’ve got Angry Cas face.”

Cas closed the door to the balcony, leaving him and Gabriel in the icy cold Paris air. “I should hit you. Why the hell did you say that to him? A grand gesture? Really?”

Gabe had the grace to look slightly ashamed. “Well, I had to know he was serious, and it’s kind of his fault.”

“It’s not his fault! Not all of it. Blame can be equally spread between me and Sam. Dean was completely faultless in this.”

“Faultless? Are you kidding me? Dean is the reason I didn’t see or hear from my brother for five years!”

“That’s what you’re holding against him? What happened in 2001?”
Gabe huffed and turned away from Cas, staring out into the city. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I didn’t know if you were alive or dead, and meanwhile, I’m trying to hold Sam’s head above water. They kept telling him Dean was going to die. It was one of the worst years of my life, and it all comes back to Dean.”

“You’re blaming him for all of that? What his father did to him? Gabe-”

“No, I don’t blame him for John did. But I do blame him for running you off.”

“Well, I didn’t have to leave. I could have stayed. I could have waited until morning and talked to him. But I ran, I left everything behind. I ran and I didn’t look back. So even all the stuff that happened back then is at least partially my fault as well.”

“That’s bullshit. He cheated on you. He made you leave -”

“Nobody made me do anything.” Cas sighed, resting his hands on the balcony rail. “But telling Dean he had to prove something? That was unnecessary, Gabe. You didn’t need to do that. I would have been perfectly happy that he got on an airplane for me. Nothing else was needed.”

“Well, I had to know that he was serious.”

“The fact that he asked you for help at all should have been a clue.”

Gabe had the grace to look properly chastised.

“Besides, wasn’t most of this to impress Sam anyway? Did it work?”

Blushing, his brother’s lips tilted slightly. “Uh, seeing as how neither of us got much sleep last night, I’d say yeah, it worked.”

“Well, that’s a positive, at any rate.”

“Yeah. He’s just as amazing as I thought. I’m crazy about that kid, Cas. I don’t even know how to put it into words.”

They both watched as Sam stood and pulled Dean into a tight hug.

“I understand, believe me,” Cas said softly, watching as Dean pulled away from Sam after a moment, and turned, staring out at Cas. “I understand 100%.”

“You’re still crazy about him, aren’t you?”

“I love him, Gabe. I’ve never loved anyone before him, since him, it’s only Dean. It’s always been Dean. He’s everything. I shouldn’t have left Baltimore in the first place.”

“But you did, and he cared enough to follow you. Make a fresh start. Get to know each other again and put the past to bed.”

“Which reminds me. Were you serious? When you handed him your credit card?”

Gabe nodded. “Yes. He can use it however he wants.”

“Would you mind if we did a little traveling on it? I could take him to Ireland, and maybe Greece. If that’s ok?”

“It’s fine. Go. Fall in love again.”
Cas smiled, and pulled Gabe into a tight hug. “Thank you so much.”

“No thanks needed. I’d do anything for you, Cassie. You gotta know that.”

They hugged briefly, then pushed the doors open and walked back into the suite. More hugs were exchanged. After, Dean gathered his things and they left Sam and Gabe behind.

“Lunch, and the Louvre, ok?” Cas asked him, winding their fingers together in the cab.

“Sounds good.”

“Are you ok?”

Dean turned to him, eyes soft, “Yeah, Cas, I’m good.”

“Good,” Cas said, squeezing his hand.

They left Sam and Gabe at the George V and dropped off Dean’s bag at the flat, found a charming little bistro for lunch, and then Cas took Dean to the Louvre. They stood in the queue for the *Mona Lisa*, and Dean commented that it was much smaller than he had realized.

He actually seemed more interested in the museum's sculpture exhibits, standing and staring at *Wings of Victory* for a long time, eyes sweeping over every curve of the marble, as though he were trying to commit it to memory.

Cas and Dean spent the better part of the day at the museum. Dean was very quiet and introspective, awed at times by the priceless art on display. He seemed to have a lot on his mind, but he also seemed to enjoy the Louvre all the same.

They went back to the flat for supper, and he wasn't long until he was yawning, eyelids drooping.

"Would you like to go to bed?" Cas asked.

"Yeah, I'm pretty tired."

"Ok."

"Goodnight, then," Dean said quietly, disappearing into the bedroom.

Cas sighed, frustrated. He'd hoped that maybe they could talk, and that Dean would open up, but the other man still seemed unsure. He would just remain patient, and wait for Dean to come around, Cas decided, as he made up his bed on the couch.

He fell asleep sometime after ten, determined he would get Dean talking in the morning, but was awoken at two by Dean, his eyes wide.

"What is it?"

"Is there a chance? Am I wasting my time here? You don't talk to me, and I feel like I'm treading water and I can't stay up. I need a lifeline, here, Cas. I need to know that I didn't fly halfway around the world for nothing. Please, something, *anything*. This is - I am so scared all the time, and you're not talking, and you said we would talk and I need to talk."

"Ok, it's ok," Cas sat up and reached for Dean's hands, surprised to find them shaking. "I never said I didn't want to talk; I do. More than anything. But you seemed like you needed space. I was trying to give it to you."
"No," Dean shook his head vehemently, "I need to talk. I just don't know where to start. I don't know what to say."

Cas pulled Dean down onto the couch with him. "Why don't you start with why you're so scared?"

"Are you kidding?"

"No. I know you've said you're not the same person you were before. Is that why?"

"Well, yeah, I mean the Dean you knew? He was an ok guy. Me? I'm fucked up."

"You're not fucked up."

"Yes, I am. Ask Sam. I'm different. I don't get the jokes anymore, I sometimes just completely zone out and stare off into space, I forget things, I lose things, and shit, I cry at the drop of a hat. Hell," he sniffled, "I'm crying now."

"Ok," Cas said, "That's not a big deal, Dean."

"Yes, it is," he insisted. "The Dean you fell in love with was easy going. Yeah, maybe I had my demons, but I dealt with it. I told the jokes, I made people laugh. I was funny, and chill, and I had my shit together for the most part. Now, I'm just - I'm fucking broken, Cas. I'm broken."

"You don't look broken to me."

"Because you don't know me anymore!"

"But isn't that what all this is supposed to be about? Getting to know each other again?"

Dean looked very unsure.

"Dean, if there was no chance, you wouldn't be here now. No matter what's passed between us, I'm not so cruel as to leave you with hope if there wasn't any." He pulled Dean's hands to his lips and kissed them softly. "The idea is that we spend this time together, talking, and getting to know each other again. You're not the only one who's different. You're not the only one who's changed. I wouldn't give you hope if there was no chance, though, I wouldn't. There is a chance. There's a very good chance. Because you strip away everything, all the years that have passed, and you'll find I'm still the man that loves you. That, of all things, hasn't changed."

Dean's lower lip trembled, and a few more tears rolled down his cheeks, but he nodded.

"You should go back to bed. It's late, and you still look exhausted. We'll talk more in the morning, and I'd like to discuss plans with you for the rest of our time here. Ok?"

"Ok," Dean whispered, reluctantly pulling himself from the couch. "See you in the morning. Or later in the morning, at any rate. 'Night, Cas."

"Goodnight, Dean."

Dean was the first one up in the morning. He took a shower and brushed his teeth, got dressed and made coffee. Cas was up as soon as he smelled it, stumbling out to the kitchen with his hair mussed and circles under his eyes. He took the cup Dean offered him, slumping into the nearest chair with a groan.

"That good, huh?" Dean asked, amused.
"You're in a better mood."

"Yeah, I guess I am."

They ate breakfast together, making inane small talk over pastries and coffee. It was refreshingly domestic, Dean thought, and he found it a bit easier to smile that morning.

"So I talked to Gabe yesterday," Cas said, after draining the last of his second cup, "And he said, yes, the AmEx is at our disposal and he was very serious when he said to do as we please. So, in the interest of getting to know each other again, and not limiting ourselves to one place, how would you feel about traveling to some of the other countries? You've never been to Europe, correct?"

"I've never been out of the states."

"How did you get a passport so quickly?"

Dean grinned, "Sam's got a good friend in the state department that pulled a few strings."

"Wow."

"Yeah. So where to first, then?"

"I was thinking Ireland. I love Dublin."

"Ireland would be kind of cool."

"But, Dean, it's not just for the sake of sightseeing. We're going to talk. Ok?"

"Ok," Dean said softly, "That would be good."

"I'm going to get a shower, and then I'll pack. Why don't you go ahead and pack, and then we'll get going. And if there's somewhere you want to go."

"The Sistine Chapel," Dean said instantly. He'd been wanting to go there for the better part of his adult life.

Cas smiled, "So Rome, then?"

"Yeah. And Morocco. I want to see Marrakesh."

"Ok. I want to go to Santorini."

"Greece?"

"Yes."

"Oh, crap, that means planes, doesn't it?" Dean's stomach churned.

"We'll take the train as much as possible. Now get ready. I'll take my shower and call René and let him know we're done with the flat." He stood and stretched, and headed for the bathroom.

"Cas?"

"Yes?" he asked, turning.

"Thank you."
Cas smiled, and disappeared into the bathroom, and Dean went to pack his bag.

In Dublin, they rented a small room from a sweet old lady who pinched Dean's freckled cheeks and could not be convinced that the green-eyed man with the obvious American accent was not a native of Ireland. It didn't help that Cas had bought him an ivory cable-knit fisherman's sweater when Dean complained about the cold.

It did make him look like a native.

The room only had one bed, but they agreed they could sleep in the same place without anything they didn't want to happen happening.

Dinner was fun; they had fish and chips at a classic Irish pub, complete with pints of Guinness, and drinking songs, and Dean wearing that damnable sweater. His eyes sparkled in the dim light of the bar, and he sang along with the locals, although Cas did notice he didn't drink much.

They went back to the room, tired, and changed into sweats and tees. Initially, they laid on separate sides of the bed, but when Cas awoke in the morning, Dean's arm was slung around his waist, and his head rested on his shoulder, short spiky hair tickling his chin.

He didn't move, but laid still, reveling in the feel of Dean's warmth pressed against his skin, and slowly dozed back off again.

The next time he awoke, Dean was sitting in the window, staring out into a foggy winter morning.

"Dean? Are you ok?"

He had his knees pulled up to his chest, and he didn't say anything at first.

"Sam says I used to ask for you. Once I started talking again. I don't remember. Everything from September to January is kind of muddled in my brain. I remember feeling like I was missing something. I remember Sam crying a lot. It was hard, learning to function again, and once I got to a place where I actually could do some things myself, I knew I didn't want Sam to find you. I didn't want you to see me like that."

Cas said nothing, not wanting to interrupt Dean, but he sat up in the bed.

"I have never hated myself more than I did in the days after you left. I have never in my life told a worse lie than the one I told that night. When I said I didn't love you - I didn't mean it. I loved you so much it hurt. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you. But then Vic showed up, and his life was falling apart. And then my dad came, and told me my mom would hate what I'd become, she'd hate what we had." Dean sniffled, and Cas watched him swipe at his face.

"Somewhere, in the back of my mind, I knew that wasn't true. I knew she'd just be happy that I was happy. But I bought into his bullshit. And I hurt you. I lashed out and I hurt you."

He shuddered, and sniffled, but he still didn't turn from the window.

"I threw away the best thing I ever had, and I -" He bowed his head, trying to muffle his sobs. Cas slid out of the bed, and sat beside him on the window seat.

Dean fell into his open arms, pressed his face into Cas's chest, and cried for a long time.
They kissed in Cork at the Blarney Stone. It was raining, and dreadfully cold, but Dean was determined he was going to do it. Cas held onto him while he bent over backwards, rain streaming down over his neck and shoulders, but his lips touched the freezing stone for the briefest of seconds, and Dean was laughing his fool head off when Cas pulled him upright again.

His blue eyes were twinkling, and Dean couldn't help himself. He pulled Cas in and kissed him softly. His cheeks flamed after, and he felt like a teenager again.

They held hands for the rest of the day.

In Rome, Dean's eyes were wide and awed as he scanned the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He seemed at a loss for how much the experience moved him, but Cas just held his hand and let him look his fill. Words weren't important. All that was important to Castiel in that moment was the look of wonderment on Dean's face.

They moved on to St. Peter's Basilica after, and Dean spent a long time at Michelangelo's *Pieta*. All of the art in the Basilica was extraordinary, but Dean seemed especially drawn to one mosaic in particular - Reni's *Michael*.

An extraordinarily detailed glass mosaic of the famous painting, it captured Dean's attention for the better part of an hour.

"I've been waiting my whole life for this," Dean said reverently, eyes fixed on the image of Michael crushing Lucifer beneath his feet.

They spent literal hours in the Basilica, and although Cas was impressed by the absolutely priceless works, he was more enthralled by Dean, with his wide-eyed gaze.

Dean was beautiful.

"I was so angry, for so long," Cas said quietly, out of nowhere.

They were in Venice, even though it was cold, because Dean wanted to see it. Cas indulged him.

He was standing by the glass french doors that led out to a balcony overlooking the canal when Cas spoke, and he turned slowly, to find Cas sitting cross-legged in the center of their bed.

"I wanted to hate you. I wanted to hate you for what you did to us. I was happy, and I was in love, and you pulled the rug out from under me. I wanted so badly to hate you, but I've never been able to. Instead, I just became angry. Angry about everything."

Dean sank into a chair, quiet.

"My anger burned so hot, I did everything I could to drown it. I came over here, to Paris anyway, and I drank it away. I drank myself penniless. And then I'd sober up, and remember how angry I was, and I'd just drink it all back down again. I've spent more than a decade being mad at you, mad at myself. Even after the book got published. Then I was angry that you and I didn't get the happy ending I gave Carver and David."

He looked up, tired eyes meeting Dean's.

"I'm tired of being angry. I don't want to be angry anymore."
In Santorini, the old man who owned the cottage they rented adopted them. He futzed over them, and fed them constantly; stuffed grape leaves, spanakopita, baklava, moussaka, and plenty of ouzo. They drank with the man, and enjoyed his company greatly; but he only spoke Greek, and they rarely understood anything he said. Still, it was a beautiful place, and Cas enjoyed waking up to find Dean pressed against him in the early light of dawn.

The house was painted white with bright blue shutters. It was cool, but not cold, and they spent time touring the island, and walking along the shore. The sunsets were beautiful.

At night, they laid close together, holding hands, stealing kisses, and discussing mundane things.

They spent three days on the island, and the last night, as they laid in bed, Dean's head pillowed on his chest, Cas felt content. He felt comfortable. Dean was warm in his arms.

This was what he wanted, he realized. This was all he'd ever wanted. Everything began, and ended, with Dean.

He slept well that night.

Marrakesh was warm. It wasn't hot, by any stretch of the imagination, but balmy and comfortable.

They found a hotel, and Dean fell in love with it at first sight. It looked like the set of an Indiana Jones movie, with a hookah bar in the lobby, and a piano, and he kept waiting for Sallah to walk in.

They toured the Koutoubia Mosque, and Bahia Palace, and got lost in the bazaar. Dean was laughing when they finally made it back to the hotel, and they settled in at the bar and shared a hookah. They talked quietly, until Dean saw the piano. He smiled, and stood.

"Here's lookin' at you, kid," he grinned, chucking Cas's chin. He settled down at the piano, fingers fooling with the keys. Cas seemed to recognize the song immediately.

"Play it again, Dean," he smiled.

"You must remember this, a kiss is still a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh. The fundamental things apply, as time goes by." He smiled at Cas.

"And when two lovers woo, they still say: I love you, on that you can rely. No matter what the future brings, as time goes by.

"Moonlight and love songs - never out of date, hearts full of passion - jealousy and hate, woman needs man - and man must have his mate. That no one can deny.

"It's still the same old story, a fight for love and glory, a case of do or die. The world will always welcome lovers. As time goes by."

There was some polite applause from the bar's patrons as Dean returned to his seat, but all he noticed was the way Cas was smiling at him, handing him a glass of wine as he sat. Dean took a sip, but set it aside.

"I don't drink much anymore," he told Cas, "My body doesn't like it. So I just don't. And it's funny, I don't really miss it."

"Alcohol is overrated," Cas smiled over his own glass of wine.

"Yeah," he smiled back. "You know, speaking of alcohol, I went to see my dad Christmas Day."
"Really?"

"Mmhmm. And we had a long talk. He's read the book."

"Wow."

"He told me to come find you."

Cas looked surprised at that. "He did?"

"Yeah. He said you were the same to me as my mom was to him. That's a pretty big compliment, coming from John Winchester, trust me."

"I do. Trust you, I mean. So that's why you came to Paris?"

"One of many reasons," Dean said softly, fingers toying with the hose for the hookah. "But the main reason -" He sighed, and stared off into the distance. "The main reason is because I know I still love you. And truth is, Cas, I don't think I ever stopped. I think I've always loved you. And I don't think I'll ever be able to be with anyone else. Don't get me wrong, I was going to give my life with Anna everything I had, but even with her, I never felt - I never felt -" Dean struggled to complete his thought.

"You felt like something was missing?" Cas asked softly, reaching for Dean's hand.

"Yeah. You. You were missing."

The kisses grew heated that night in Morocco.

"Don't stop," Dean whispered. "Please don't stop. I need you, Cas."

He slid Dean's shirt off, pulling him back down into the bed. Dean tugged at his boxers, and Cas lifted his hips so Dean could slide them off. Dean pulled his own boxers off and pressed them together, skin on skin, electricity sparking when their erections brushed.

"Fuck, Cas," Dean breathed, lips on his neck, "Want you. Want you so bad."

"I'm here. I'm here, Dean. What do you want? Tell me what you want."

Dean groaned. "Fuck me, Cas. I need you to fuck me."

"Do we have anything?"

Green eyes sparkling, Dean grinned brilliantly. "I'm like a boy scout, Cas," he chuckled, crawling out of bed long enough to grab lube and condoms out of his duffel. "Never leave home without it."

Cas smiled, pulling Dean back towards him. He wrapped his hand around Dean's neck, bringing their lips together. Dean tasted so familiar, he felt so familiar; their bodies slotted together, remembering how to move as one.

"I need you, Cas," Dean whispered hoarsely.

"You have me. You have me, Dean." Cas opened the lube and coated his fingers. He claimed Dean's lips as his slipped his index finger inside his body. He prepped him, slow and easy, with his mouth and fingers, until Dean was a sobbing mess, hips thrusting into nothing, and hands gripping the sheets hard enough to tear.
"Cas, please," Dean begged, "I can't take it. I need you. Need you."

Kissing a slow trail up Dean's torso, Cas rested his hips against Dean's, lining up and pushing in slowly. Dean's back came off the bed. He grabbed Cas's face in both hands, pulled him down for a hard kiss.

Dean's hips met every thrust, and his hands swept along Cas's back, pulled at his hair, held fast on his waist - Dean's hands were everywhere.

He shoved Cas up, and moved quickly, switching their positions. Cas landed on his back and Dean climbed on top, his face flushed as he sunk down on Cas, rolling his hips to take him even deeper.

The look of ecstasy on Dean's face was mesmerizing, the flex of muscles under glistening tattooed skin, as he moved up and down, riding Cas's cock, hands braced on his chest. Cas reached forward, wrapping his hand around Dean, timing his strokes with the rhythm of Dean's body.

"So beautiful, Dean, so gorgeous, so lovely, I have missed you. I have missed you so much," Cas breathed.

Dean smiled down at him, eyes hooded and dark. "Missed you too. Fuck, Cas," he gasped, hips stuttering, "I love you. I love you. I love you, I never stopped, I never, a-ah, I never stopped."

"I love you, too," Cas whispered, so close, and he reached up for Dean's arm, wrapping his fingers around the tattoo of his handprint. "I will never stop loving you."

Dean groaned, arched his spine and his head fell back as he came, painting Cas's chest with his come. He watched him, watched him writhe in ecstasy, beauty and grace, and god, he loved him so much. He loved Dean with every ounce of his being. Cas's hips left the bed, as he came inside of Dean, stars exploding across his field of vision.

Breathing heavily, Dean smiled at him, and Cas pulled him down for a kiss. He held Dean close, and murmured "I love you," into his sweaty hair.

"Love you, too," Dean said softly.

They fell asleep, warm and sated and wrapped around each other, in a big soft bed surrounded by white curtains. The windows were open, a soft breeze caressing bare skin. Sunlight filled the room slowly with the dawn, and Dean blinked awake to find Cas sharing his pillow, his beautiful face mere inches from his own.

He stared for a while, a soft smile on his lips, as Cas opened his eyes.

"Marry me," he whispered.

"Ok," Cas responded.

They fell back asleep in the warmth and the sunlight.
Cas and Dean reunited with Sam and Gabe in Paris.

He bought a platinum band for Dean at Cartier, and Sam brought the ring Dean had purchased for him all those years ago.

It was a small civil ceremony, attended by just their brothers, but it was important to them, and the culmination of twelve years, three continents, and a love that refused to die. There were tears from both of them when they exchanged rings.

They'd come full circle.
They'd finally come home.

Chapter End Notes

Art by Linneart
Epilogue (All This Time)

Chapter Notes

And finally, the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was snowing when they returned to Baltimore on the Saturday before Dean had to go back to work. He handed Cas the keys and told him to unlock the firehouse while he helped the limo driver get the bags in.

He stopped to snap a picture of Cas, with his navy knit beanie and his face turned towards the sky, tongue extended to catch snowflakes. Dean snapped a picture of the brilliant smile he tossed him when he realized Dean was taking pictures.

Cas let himself in after that, and Dean tossed his duffel in the open door, then gathered Cas's garment bag. The limo driver dropped Cas's other suitcase inside and left.

Dean set everything down and closed the door. He walked to where Cas stood in the center of the studio and wrapped his arms around his husband's waist.

"What do you think?" he whispered, lips pressed against Cas's neck.

"You finished it," Cas breathed, staring up at the painting.

"Yup. Christmas Eve."

"It's beautiful. You finished Azrael."

"Nope. Not Azrael. Castiel, the Angel of Thursday. My angel."

Cas turned in his arms, facing him, and he reached for Dean's hands, laughing softly when their rings clinked together. "I love you. I love you so much." He leaned up and kissed Dean, smiling when he pressed their foreheads together.

"Love you, too, Cas," Dean said softly. "Welcome home."

Eighteen Months Later

"Stop fidgeting. You look great." Cas's hands smoothed down the collar of Dean's jacket. "It's going to be fine."

"Got a lot riding on this. I'm trying hard not to freak out here -"

Reaching for Dean's hands, Cas pulled them to his chest. "The work is exquisite. It's going to be fine, and you're going to be a big hit."

"Or it flops hard, people laugh at me, and I go back to teaching. And while I wouldn't mind the teaching part, I am not a fan of people laughing at me."
"No one's going to be laughing."

"It's completely different from what I was doing before."

"But it's been thirteen years, fourteen, actually, since you had a gallery showing. You're essentially a new artist."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" Dean groused.

Heels clicked on the floor near them. "I don't know why you're worried. The show is sold out." Bela Talbot flicked her mane of honey brown hair over her shoulder. "I don't take a chance on just anyone, you know."

Dean sighed. "I know."

"Will Victor be here tonight?"

"No idea. Maybe?"

"Hmm." She smiled wistfully. "Talk about the one that got away. At any rate, we're about to open. Are you ready?"

Eyes widening a bit, Dean's hands shook briefly in Cas's grasp, and he squeezed them reassuringly.

Dean took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

Cas made one last check of Dean's outfit. His husband looked amazing in black skinny jeans, a grey vintage Led Zeppelin shirt, and a black wool blazer. "Let's do this," Cas smiled.

Nodding, Dean gave him a half grin, and let Cas lead him to the front.

As they went, Cas's eyes drifted over the many new pieces of art Dean had produced for his reintroduction to the art world.

They were different, incredibly different, than the massive canvases and full color angels Dean had painted before. These new pieces were a reflection of his life now.

On a tall, antique door was a stark black and white painting of the Eiffel Tower. A broken piece of drywall held a craggy image of the cliffs of Dover, England. An old weathered chunk of driftwood was painted with an image of the Golden Gate Bridge. And a battered black car trunk lid wore a bleak image of a city street in Baltimore.

Landscapes, cityscapes, scenes from around the world, painted on found objects, battered and broken, worn down by age. But what made the paintings truly remarkable was the single image featured in every last piece.

A full color, dark-haired angel - in a trenchcoat.

Dean had painted Cas into every one of the pieces. In the Eiffel Tower painting, the angel stood below one of the tower's arches, head tipped back as he looked upward at the tower's structure.

On the cliffs, he crouched, staring out at the water, head tilted curiously.

On the bridge, he stood in the middle, as cars passed, black wings arched above the oblivious drivers.
And in Baltimore, he stood at the door of an old firehouse, fist raised to knock.

Dean had named the series *Thursdays*. It seemed appropriate.

At the front of the gallery, Bela had opened the doors and people were starting to stream in. Cas saw many familiar faces, their friends and family, and many people he didn't know.

Tuxedoed servers moved amongst the crowd with hors d'oeuvres and champagne. The whole thing was very elegant. It was no wonder that an hour in, Dean was still squirming.

"Welcome to Talbot Galleries," Bela announced. "And our exclusive showcase, featuring artist Dean Winchester, and his new series, *Thursdays*. Dean?"

There was quite a bit of enthusiastic applause, and camera flashes, and Dean squeezed his hand tightly for a moment, before crossing to the podium where Bela stood.

He smiled at the crowd, nervousness evident in his green eyes, but he hid it well, and only really Cas could tell.

"Dean, please tell us a bit about your work?" Bela smiled, and stepped away, leaving Dean alone.

"Um. The paintings - they um, they represent my life. And how I see the world. Everything is kind of stark, black and white - bleak - but then Cas came in," he smiled at Cas, "And he filled my life with color again. He makes everything bright and beautiful. He's my muse. He's my everything."

"So, um, Gabe asked me to marry him," Sam said out of nowhere, as they stood below one of Dean's paintings.

This one was on the warped and deformed lid of a baby grand piano. It was a depiction of a white life guard chair, in front of a stormy sea in Ocean City, Maryland, and Cas was walking along the water.

"Can't say I'm surprised," Dean smiled.

"Well, there's more. We're, um, well I'm -"

"Spit it out, Sammy."

"I'm moving to L.A. with him."

Dean grinned, "Yeah, I saw that coming too."

"What, are you psychic now?"

"No, I just know you."

Sam chuckled, "Yeah, guess you do."

"I'm happy for you. This is what I wanted, for you to have your own life, to have your own thing. This is good, Sam. And there's this amazing thing called modern communication, and the internet, and dare I say it, airplanes?"

"You hate flying."

"Some things - some people - make it worthwhile."
"Right, ok, I got you." He scuffed his shoe on the floor, and slid his hands into his pockets, and for a moment, Dean wasn't looking at his thirty-something brother, he was looking at that overgrown teenager that had shown up on his doorstep fourteen years before.

"Be my best man?"

"Duh."

Sam grinned brilliantly. "Cool. Cool," he patted Dean's shoulder and moved off into the crowd, finding Gabe and weaving their hands together.

Familiar faces were everywhere, and their presence calmed him.

Benny was sipping champagne and talking with Amelia and Jimmy Novak. Charlie and Dorothy were holding hands while they admired the Eiffel Tower piece. Jo and her fiancé, Inias, were talking with Cas's youngest brother, Raffy. Rufus was leaning heavily on his cane and rolling his eyes at Andy and Ash. Victor and his wife, Tamara, were chatting with Bela. He had to chuckle at how uncomfortable she looked.

Even several of his former students had come; he'd seen Krissy Chambers and Kevin Tran by the Baltimore painting he'd done on the Impala's old trunk lid.

Cas met his eyes from where he was standing and talking to Ellen and Bobby, and he smiled at Dean.

"Bobby in a suit," Dean muttered under his breath, "Now I've seen it all."

"Hi, Dean," said a soft voice behind him. He turned to find Anna there, red hair as bright as ever. She smiled softly at him, "This is amazing. It's beautiful. Congratulations."

"Thank you. I didn't expect to see you here."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world."

"You look good."

"No, you look good. You look happy. I'm so glad. And I can tell how much you love him. Anyone looking at these paintings can tell." Her smile was sweet and genuine, not a trace of jealousy or anger.

"Thank you," he said again.

Someone crashed into his back.

"Ouch, what the hell?" He turned to find Michael Novak standing behind him. "Dude, watch out, man," he laughed.

"Oh, sorry, I was -" Michael caught sight of Anna, and his blue eyes widened. "Oh, hi, I'm sorry - I wasn't interrupting was I?"

"No," Anna smiled.

*Oh.*

"Uh, Anna Milton, this is Michael Novak, Cas's brother." He watched Anna's eyes twinkle.
"Well, hello."

"Hello indeed," Michael smiled back.

Grinning, Dean faded back into the crowd, leaving Michael and Anna alone.

He wandered through the gallery, looking at the pieces he had on display.

They'd come home from Paris, and Dean had finished out the school year. Then he'd gone on sabbatical, throwing himself head first into painting, while Cas worked on his next book.

_Thursdays_ had been the result. Thirteen months of work, and a piece for each month.

He didn't look at the price tags Bela had put on them as he walked through the gallery; he didn't want to know.

Dean found himself standing at the foot of the Castiel painting, the big one. He hadn't wanted to put it up for sale, but Cas had encouraged him. It was the only painting that didn't fit the theme.

He stared up at it, eyes sweeping along the trenchcoat, the rumpled backwards tie, and the look of fire in Cas's eyes.

"How much?"

"Huh?" Dean turned to find Dick Roman standing with Bela.

"Asking price is $25,000 Mr. Roman," Bela said coolly.

"Excellent. Susan?"

His assistant stepped forward, holding a binder out for him. Roman took a pen from her, wrote something in the book and tore out a piece of paper, handing it over to Bela.

"Um, Mr. Roman, this is three times -"

"It's what we agreed on, correct, Dean? $75,000? Although I didn't expect to wait thirteen years for it." He leaned closer, reading the tag. "And it's Castiel, not Azrael. So I'm guessing I'll have to commission Azrael from you?"

"Uh," Dean said blankly.

"Or perhaps one of the new ones? From the _Thursdays_ series? It doesn't matter. Castiel will complete my lobby just as well as Azrael would have. I don't know art, but I know what I like, and I like you, Dean. I'll be in touch. Ms. Talbot, have this shipped to Roman Enterprises. I assume your gallery will cover the fees?"

"Absolutely, Mr. Roman," Bela assured him.

"Excellent. Close your mouth, Dean, you look like a fish. Susan? I'm ready."

He was gone as quick as he came, Dean still standing there, staring after him.

"Well, that was unexpected!" Bela chortled, looking through the leather folio in her hand.

Cas sidled up and took Dean's hand in his own. "So how did he do?"
"Every piece sold. Dean, you've made a fortune tonight, and I was hearing nothing but praise from the critics. You should be very proud." She smiled, and squeezed his arm before walking away.

Cas smiled up at him. "You did it. You did it, baby. I knew you could." He pulled Dean down for a kiss, as many cameras flashed, and there was applause.

"I'm back," Dean breathed. "I'm back."

"Damn right, you're back."

"I love you, Cas." Dean whispered, overwhelmed by the moment.

"I love you, too. Always have, always will."

Chapter End Notes

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!