The death of Jimmy and Castiel Shurley’s parents grants them a modest inheritance and, more importantly, freedom to make their own choices. After hunting for the perfect house, they find what they’re looking for in an old farmhouse in the mountains of upstate New York: nice neighbors not too close, the beauty of nature surrounding them, and solitude, save for each other. The isolation is both a blessing and a curse; Castiel has pined for his brother since puberty, but incest is forbidden and homosexuality is taboo, and he knows if he speaks about his feelings he’ll lose his brother as a best friend and destroy their careers as children’s book authors as well.

Fortunately, Castiel finds a new friend in Dean, the strange man who hangs around their property. Sure, it’s a weird, especially since Dean refuses to enter the house or even meet Jimmy, but Dean is gregarious, beautiful, kind, and brilliantly knowledgeable about the natural wonders surrounding them. Castiel isn’t the best at assessing people but he’s absolutely sure there’s no harm in Dean…
Oh maaaan guys this has been a ton of work but I finally am posting my DCJ BB! YAY!

I was paired with the amazing diminuel (aka SillyBlue) for this fic and I'm so in love with her art, OMG! (Link to art master post will be here, once I have it! : ) )

Beta'd and cheerleaded by the awesome allrealities.

Important things to know about this fic:
1. Note the tags on the Past Character Death and implied past Wincest. If you have any questions or concerns related to either tag please let me know.
2. Castiel has a lot of internalized homophobia and sexual hang ups. It gets tough sometimes. Just...be aware.
3. FLOWERS! This fic is all about plants and nature, and the symbology behind the plants and flowers and I mention is often relevant, if only in that I picked flowers whose meanings would augment the narrative. As such, the last chapter (Chapter 19) of this fic is an appendix that lists all the plants and flowers, whatever info I could find on their symbology, and links to photographs of the plants and such.

...I think that's it?

Lemme know if you have any questions. :) I hope you enjoy!

Reminder: There is an appendix in Chapter 19 of information about plants described in this story, but I've included notes at the end of each chapter regarding those mentioned for the first time in that chapter. Plant symbolism and meaning plays a meaningful role in this story. : )
“Whaddaya think?” asked Jimmy. The screen door slammed behind him as he joined Castiel on the back porch. He stopped beside Castiel, close enough that Castiel could feel his warmth, and Castiel’s breath hitched as, for a wild moment, he supposed Jimmy about to put an arm around his shoulder.

His twin would never, ever, ever, do that.
“It’s breathtaking,” Castiel said.

Perhaps he didn’t entirely mean the view. Jimmy’s enthusiasm for the house their realtor had found was spectacular and gorgeous. The view was nice too though, he supposed. From where Castiel stood, he couldn’t see a single man-made structure. No houses or other backyards or parking lots or businesses or fences or phone poles or antenna intruded on the pristine view. According to the specs they’d been handed when they’d first stepped into the living room, the old farmhouse stood on 18.5 acres. Even from the front of the house, the neighboring houses were obscured by trees, but out the back there was nothing but a rolling hill sloping downwards into bowl of a valley. The horizon was made jagged by the forest silhouetted against the clear sky and a calm pond was the centerpiece of the property, surface rippled occasionally as who-knew-what creatures sloshed through the water. Frogs, Castiel supposed, or maybe turtles or water bugs. Jimmy would know. No matter how oblivious to the natural world Jimmy pretended to be, Castiel knew his brother better than anyone, knew how deeply Jimmy cared, knew his portrayed nonchalance was a means of protecting himself.

No one knew Jimmy like Castiel did.

And no one knew Castiel like Jimmy did.

They worked so well together, in every respect.

If only they weren’t twins.

Castiel sighed and forced his attention back to his surroundings.

The property line extended well beyond the tree line, but according to the realtor, the visible backyard was about an acre. The grass was cropped close to the ground. Reeds and cattails grew thick and tall around the pond, rustling in the wind, and scattered trees rose like sentinels over the placid field. An enormous, ancient willow grew on the pond bank, draped branches skimming the water when the wind blew. Even Castiel could recognize a willow tree, though damned if he knew what any of the other trees were; the only mnemonic he knew for recognizing a plant was “leaves of three, let it be,” and he was positive that none of the trees were secretly poison ivy. The scoured, shorn stump of what once had been a second old tree made a silent monument beside the willow, rotting bole easily two paces across. Dark green moss grew thick on the dead wood and someone – presumably the previous owner of the house – had erected a decorative arrangement atop the stump, though Castiel couldn’t make out the details at this distance.

“I want this one, Cassie,” said Jimmy. Turning from the lovely vista, Castiel looked to his brother, identical to Castiel in every physical feature but so different in every way that mattered. Jimmy’s cheeks were flushed with excitement, the wind tousled his dark hair, and his eyes sparkled in the sunlight as he stared out over the field toward the horizon and the infinite blue sky. Jimmy’s eyes matched the cerulean, right down to the twinkle of sunlight, and Castiel sighed again.

Jimmy didn’t so much as glance Castiel’s way.

Utterly breathtaking. If I could see that look on your face every day…

“It’s very nice,” Castiel agreed. “Let’s put in a bid.”

...that would be enough. I don’t need more than that.

The inspector glanced down at the checklist on her iPad.
“That should do it,” she said. “There are some issues, but every house has some issues. The spots that are usually the biggest problem – and the biggest money sinks – are fine: the roof is only a couple years old and the basement is solid enough that even if – or should I say when – that pond floods, you shouldn’t get any water in the hole and even if you do the sump pump will take care of it. It’s hard to be sure about the furnace since it’s summer but all the indicators suggest it should be fine, and honestly I’m jealous of that infinite hot water heater. I suggest you talk to the current owners about doing the gutter repairs as part of the sale. That about sums it up! Any questions for me?”

Castiel said “Yes” at the same instant that Jimmy said “No” and the inspector laughed.

“What can I do you for?” she asked Castiel, smiling.

“When we went over the front porch you mentioned that we should bring in someone to tend the trees because they’d grown a bit wild, and that you thought one of the branches was in danger of hitting the house?” Castiel looked a question at her to confirm that he’d remembered the details right, and she nodded. “Would you mind looking over the trees in the back, so we have a sense of how prevalent an issue this is?”

“It’s not my area of expertise,” the inspector – Castiel had forgotten her name – confessed. “But I’ll take a peek.” She wagged an admonishing finger at Castiel. “Just – don’t quote me on any of this! I’m giving you my amateur opinion, not a professional assessment of the viability of the trees on your property.” She gestured for Castiel to lead the way. Jimmy shot Castiel a covert thumbs-up and mouthed good thinking.

If it had been anyone else, Castiel wouldn’t have understood – he was no lip reader – but Jimmy was—

Nothing. Jimmy is nothing to me.

I mean, he’s my brother, and my best friend, and my coworker, and that’s plenty for one person to be to another. It’s preposterous that I dare think about more, especially when the “more” is so beyond the pale.

They were going to be living together, and Castiel needed to get his inappropriate...everything...under control.

There are things that are right and good, and things that are right yet bad, and things that are wrong yet good, but feeling physical attraction toward my brother falls firmly into “wrong and bad.”

The building was modestly sized and had a simple layout. A wide hallway connected the front of the house and the back of the house; a staircase in the hall led upstairs. Doors off the hall opened into the living room, kitchen, dining room, and the room they had dubbed ‘the study’ that the previous owners had used as a child’s bedroom, judging by the lurid pink paint and the strip of wallpaper featuring an unfamiliar cartoon character. The back porch was accessed via a door at the far end of the hallway. Castiel got there first and held the door open for the inspector and Jimmy, then stepped out after them.

Only a couple weeks had passed since their first visit to the house, but everywhere Castiel looked he saw subtle differences as spring ripened into summer. The grass was lusher, the reeds taller, the tree leaves a richer shade of green. Brownish greenish muck made an ugly patch in the pond, and the water rippled constantly around a branch that had fallen from a tree on the far side, leaves curling in on themselves as they died. Dandelions and small white flowers that resembled daisies
grew taller than the surrounding lawn.

The inspector stepped down the creaky back porch stairs and onto the lawn, heading for the nearest tree. She gave it a quick visual inspection before heading to the next, chattering about root structures and “garbage trees” and winter storms and the importance of maintenance on large properties. Castiel half-listened as they circled the area closest to the house, drifting toward the water.

The inspector stopped before the enormous willow and tsked. “This tree will have to go,” she said.

“How?” asked Jimmy.

The branches of the willow swept the ground some feet from the trunk, making a large cleared area bare save for patches of a small purple flower, lobed petals nestled amidst heart-shaped leaves. Thick tree roots emerged from beneath the soil, and wherever they did, flowers grew about them, leaves draped over bark, and the trunk was beringed by leaves and blossoms.

No matter what she says, this is far too beautiful to destroy.

“Willows are junk,” the inspector explained. “Their root are shallow and spread wide. They grow damn fast, too. One this old? There are roots all over your yard. It’s only a matter of time before they get into your well water – if they haven’t already – and they can even burst a septic tank. They’re short lived, too. You’re thinking that ‘cause this one is so big, it must be old, but I’d be surprised if it’s stood here more than 20 years. As if that weren’t enough, the branches are weak. In a bad storm, if you’re lucky you’ll only lose some of them; if you’re unlucky the whole thing will topple right into your pond. Then you’ll have a right mess.

“I bet that’s why this other one was cut down,” she added, gesturing at the stump that Castiel had noted previously. “Bolt of lightning hits and bam, tree is down, lawn is torn up…thousands of dollars in damage could have been avoided if the owners had chopped it down sooner instead of romanticizing it. It’s a tree, not a metaphor. ‘Weeping willow’ my ass…” Shaking her head, the inspector circled past the tree, heading for another tree farther down the lawn. “Now this one here…” Jimmy followed after her, her voice fading with distance, but Castiel lingered, captivated by the dead stump.

The corpse of the tree that once stood side by side with the existing willow was nearly as large around as the bole of the remaining tree. Thick moss, dark green, each sprig resembling a tiny tree, spread over the old, dead bark, covered the exposed roots, and forced its way through the lichen growing on the wood. What Castiel had thought from a distance was some kind of decoration proved to be a shrine. A sculpture of an angel carved from a pale wood rested on the stump, so intricate that the individual feathers of her spread wings were articulated and Castiel thought he’d recognize the face if it was someone he knew. A plaid scarf was wrapped around the angel’s neck, loose ends shifting in the faint breeze. Sunlight struck the finish and it gleamed, the wood polished to a lustrous shine. Something metal twinkled – a pendant, shaped like a horned head. Other items, clearly deliberately selected though Castiel didn’t see their commonality, were arranged about the base of the sculpture, nestled in the moss: an antler, a blue feather, a small carved box, a wind-scoured bone, and more.
“She’s wrong, you know,” said a gruff, unfamiliar voice. Startled, Castiel jerked around. A man stood beneath the boughs of the willow tree, tall, a smattering of freckles scattered over his tanned cheeks. His hair was the same shade of brown as the angel sculpture, and the gel that swept it back from his forehead gave it a similar burnished gleam.

His eyes were green.
Castiel wasn’t one for eye contact. Jimmy’s eyes were blue, brilliantly blue, but Castiel couldn’t think of another person he’d ever met whose eye color he’d taken note of, not even his parents.

Until now.

The man’s eyes were impossibly green.

“Huh?” stammered Castiel, registering far too late that the man expected an answer.

“That woman is wrong about willow trees,” clarified the man, lips quirking into a faint smile that somehow made his eyes seem even brighter.

*How is he real? No one’s eyes are that color. It must be my imagination.*

Poetic comparisons sprang to mind – emeralds, the rainforest, new-sown grass – but standing beneath the spreading branches of the willow, Castiel was struck by how much like the leaves the stranger’s eyes appeared.

*He’s beautiful.*

“This willow,” the man continued as if Castiel’s stunned expression made no impression on him, “has stood here since before that house was built, and a storm didn’t kill its brother.” Castiel had never heard the word “storm” said with such scorn, such disgust and disdain. “And you don’t have to worry about the septic system. This tree would never do something like that. Bursting the tank would damage the ecosystem.”

“You say that like it’s made a conscious decision where to grow its roots. It’s just a tree,” Castiel scoffed. The words no sooner left his mouth than he was sure they weren’t true, though he couldn’t put his finger on the source of his certainty. The willow wasn’t “just” a tree. The man scowled at Castiel, shook his head, and turned away only to pause, one hand resting on the willow trunk, and glance back over his shoulder. His eyes flashed – literally flashed like an aurora borealis in the winter night.

*I’ve been out in the heat too long. That must be it.*

“So, you and your brother gonna make an offer on the house?” he asked softly enough that Castiel strained to hear him.

“We already have,” said Castiel. “Do you live around here? Do you like it?”

“It’s a nice area,” the man said. “Try not to fuck it up like the last owners did.”

In the best of circumstances, Castiel wasn’t great shakes at social interactions. He knew that about himself, and did his best to concentrate on conversations, focus on what the other person said, integrate it with what he already knew, and respond accordingly.

He had no idea what was going on in this conversation, and no idea how to reply. No conversation in his life had resembled this one.

*Who is this man?*

“The inspector says the house is in good repair…?” offered Castiel tentatively. “Do you have reason to think it’s not? That the current owners’ neglected the property and that we are being sold a ‘lemon?”’
The man turned back towards Castiel and shook his head.

“No lemon...they set poison traps for the wildlife because the raccoons kept getting in their
garbage, instead of moving the cans into the garage like the previous owners did. The back of the
house used to be lined with blackberry and raspberry brambles but they ripped the bushes out
because they didn’t like the thorns. They sealed the crack that the birds used to nest in their roof,
even though the birds did no harm there, and they complained about the smell when the baby birds
died and rotted. They used ludicrous amounts of fertilizer on their shit attempt to grow a garden of
plants from Asia and the Mediterranean without bothering to check which zone those plants were
best suited to, and most of them died. A heavy rain flooded the loose soil and when the run off hit
the pond, algae bloomed, and killed the fish, and instead of trying to fix the nitrogen imbalance and
save the animals they bitched about the pond and made plans to fill it in. If they hadn’t decided to
move, this—” He made a gesture that took in the entire gorgeous backyard. “—would have been
one huge expanse of dull, mowed grass. No dragonflies. No cattails. No willow trees. No reeds. No
groundhogs or deer or fish or red leaves in the fall or redbuds in the spring. They were at war with
nature. Fuck ‘em. If you plan on behaving like that, you should leave now. Nature always wins in
the end.” The stranger sounded oddly smug, and he wrapped his arms around his chest and
smirked.

“We don’t plan to…no,” stammered Castiel. “We like how things are. It’s beautiful. I’m sorry to
hear they did so much damage. Is there a way to…” He trailed off. Why did he feel defensive?
He’d done nothing wrong! Taking a deep breath, he tried again. “You, um, seem protective of this
area.”

“Lived here my whole life,” said the man, patting the willow tree trunk fondly. “Seen a lot of city
slickers come and go. They think it looks idyllic, until the mosquitoes spawn in August and the
power goes out for a week after an ice storm. Seriously, that sort? Best move on.” His tone left no
doubt that he thought Castiel was exactly that sort.

He didn’t know a damn thing about Castiel.

“If that’s how the current residents felt, I assume they didn’t build this shrine?” Castiel turned back
to the angel perched on the tree stump.

“Nope,” the man said, and he was definitely smug. “I did. Every time they tried to take it down, I
put it back up. If you try to take it down—”

“We won’t,” Castiel interrupted. Looking again, he was captivated by the angel’s beautiful,
smooth-cheeked face. Locks of perfectly carved hair framed her divine expression, eyes lowered,
lips pursed and pouty. Even knowing as much about art as Castiel did, he couldn’t have said how
the sculptor had created the illusion of a single tear beading down her cheek. “Why is she crying?”

“Because her son died.”

“What—”

“Cassie, you planning to play tree house all day?” Jimmy shouted. Startled, Castiel gazed toward
the house, where Jimmy stood on the porch, waving for him to follow.

Right, he was here to do the inspection. He was here with Jimmy. He’d totally lost track of time,
lost track of his companions, lost track of everything save their mysterious neighbor and this
bizarre, confusing conversation. The man was mesmerizing; no one save Jimmy had ever
captivated Castiel so completely.
But unlike with Jimmy, maybe it’s okay if this stranger captivates me…?

“I have to go,” Castiel apologized.

“Dean,” said the man, thrusting a hand in Castiel’s direction. Castiel stared blankly. “My name is Dean.” Dean offered his hand again, but he didn’t move from beneath the shade cast by the willow branches. Glancing from the house to the strange man, Castiel stepped beneath the canopy. The air seemed cooler in the protection of their shade, the air redolent with rich soil and a lovely light floral scent that must have come from the abundant purple blossoms.

“This century, bro!” called Jimmy.

Castiel sighed. “I’m Castiel, and my brother is James,” he supplied. “Since you live around here, I suppose we’ll see you again? Our closing date is June 28th.”

“You don’t mind me hangin’ out on your property-to-be?” said Dean with obvious surprise.

It hadn’t even crossed Castiel’s mind that Dean was on “their” land.

“No.”

“Awesome.” Dean grinned. “Well, then, be seein’ ya.”

By the time Castiel got back to the house and glanced back to see Dean, the man was gone, though there was scant cover on the lawn amidst the sparse trees.

“Who were you talking to?” Jimmy asked. “He was hot.”

“His name is Dean,” Castiel explained. “He’s one of the neighbors, and he really, really likes willow trees. And angels.”

“Hot and weird,” sighed Jimmy, making a disgusted face. “Damn it, why are the cute ones always psycho?”

Shaking his head, Jimmy turned and went back into the house. Castiel stared after him, at a loss for words.

He thought Jimmy was insanely hot.

Jimmy wasn’t psycho.

But Castiel knew, had always know, that he was psycho for thinking of his brother as…desirable.

Fuckable. You think your brother is fuckable.

Ugh. That’s disgusting. And untrue.

It’s more than that.

With a sigh, Castiel followed Jimmy into the house. Jimmy wasn’t one of the cute, psycho ones, but Castiel was, and always had been.

At least living out in the boonies, he’d not have to watch Jimmy date other people.

Castiel knew, objectively, that he should want Jimmy to be happy, want Jimmy to find love in the arms of a wonderful man or woman, but he didn’t. He wanted Jimmy to stay with him, wanted
Jimmy to be with him. He’d never have Jimmy in the way he wanted most, but at least they could work together, at least they could live together, at least they could explore the fantastic journey of life together.

Always so selfish, Castiel…

“Earth to Cassie…” Jimmy waved a hand in his face as Castiel came to a stop beside him in the entry foyer. “You with me, bro?”

...something’s twisted in me and it always has been.

“Where’s the inspector?” he asked. Unhappiness with himself made him sound disgruntled, angry.

Taking it out on him, as if my perversion is his fault…

“She left? When the inspection was finished? Seriously, dude, what’s with you today?” Jimmy laughed.

It was, as it had always been, the most beautiful sound Castiel had ever heard. His chest ached.

“Nothing,” he said flatly. “I’m fine. That went well, don’t you think?”

“I do think,” Jimmy agreed. “This house rocks. It has indoor plumbing! Like, everything I’ve dreamed of and more! I can’t wait ‘til the closing!”

Chapter End Notes

Plants and associated symbolism mentioned in this chapter. See Chapter 19 for details and more information about these plants, as well as links to images.

Blackberry (aka bramble): sorrow, arrogance, remorse, loss, remembrance. Religious symbolism includes Christ’s crown of thorns, cursed by Lucifer, the purity of the virgin Mary, and the blood of Christ.

Cattail: lust, peace, prosperity.

Dandelion: overcoming hardships. Also considered a symbol of Christ's Passion. Dandelions are an invasive so pervasive we're stuck with it here in New York.

Daisy: Innocence, childhood, purity, hope, happiness. In Christianity, daisies are a symbol of the Virgin Mary and commemorate her chastity, grace and purity. Also a representation of the innocence of the Christ child. Invasive in North America. The small flowers that Castiel thinks resemble daisies...are daisies.

Lichen: no known symbolism. There are types of lichen native to every habitat in the world, more or less.

Moss: charity, maternal love. There are many native varieties of moss; I specifically meant moss in the bryopsida class.

Poison Ivy: no known symbolism.
Raspberry: kindness, blood of the heart, fragility, childbirth, pregnancy.

Redbud: betrayal and remorse. Judas is said to have hung himself from a redbud tree.

Reed: life, purpose, purification, the power of creation, growth. In Christianity, it is a symbol of humiliation.

Violet: humility, faithfulness, modesty. The purple flowers blooming around the base of the willow tree are violets. Violets are associated with the virgin Mary and are sometimes seen as a symbol of her virginity and modesty.

Willow Tree: nature, fertility, life, balance, learning harmony, strength, stability. Though Castiel calls the tree by the pond a "weeping willow," the traditional weeping willow is native to China. The tree in the story is a Black Willow, salix nigra.
A brief note on invasive species: So in this story, as you'll see, there's some discussion of invasive plant species, and getting rid of them. Unfortunately, a lot of tremendously common "lawn" plants in the United States are invasive - starting with dandelions, clover, ground ivy, and on to daisies, forget-me-nots, and more mentioned in this story - but they've been here so long that they've effectively "nativized" - no matter how assiduous the homeowner there isn't a lawn in the fricken state of New York that doesn't have dandelions, for example. I could photograph every one of the flowers listed above in my own backyard (which isn't large, mind you) when I haven't mowed in a few days (I've actually been thinking about doing so...I've currently got dandelions, forget me nots, buttercups and creeping charlie/ground ivy blooming in my yard, and the clover hasn't flowered yet but it's there...no daisies but that's cause I mowed relatively recently...). So please take my delineation of "invasive" vs. "non-invasive" with a grain of salt.

Thanks, guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A hot breeze carried a whiff of decay and whipped strands of sodden dark hair into Castiel’s eyes. The day was sultry, the air filled with the buzz of insects that swirled in a cloud over the pond. The past month was a blur: dealing with the bank, packing their scant belongings, talking to a lawyer, negotiating to fix the gutters, taking care of dozens of details related to settling their parents’ estate, loading the moving truck, and heading out to their new home.

That morning, Castiel had woken up on a mattress that had once belonged to their parents in a room hung with fresh new curtains, still smelling so strongly of whatever pungent cleaning solution the previous owners had used that Castiel’s nose stung. Laying in bed, he’d realized in bemusement that he had nothing he had to do that day.

The boxes were unpacked. The furniture was in place. The appliances were plugged in. The shower had a curtain. The door had a mat. The bookshelves were lined with books and tchotchkes and worn photographs he and Jimmy had taken of natural vistas the world over. Stashes of bulk toilet paper and paper towels were stored on industrial shelving they’d built in the basement.

They were completely moved in.

It had been so long since Castiel had been able to do his actual job that he’d forgotten what it felt like to not have ten things that had to be done by tomorrow hanging over his head, ten more that should have been done yesterday crushing down on his shoulders.

The wind picked up, strong enough that the clear water in the jar Castiel used to clean his brushes sloshed over and splashed on the wooden boards beneath him, darkening them.

Castiel stared at the blank canvas he’d mounted on his easel on the back porch, glanced back out at the beautiful view from the backyard, and reached for his pencils.
He had work to do.

Faint lines sketched the outline of the pond, the reeds, the willow tree, the sweep of the hill, the stark silhouette of trees against the flawless blue horizon. Castiel’s hands trembled, imperceptible to the eye but apparent in the jagged unsteadiness of his artwork. He’d scarce held a pencil or a brush in the eight months since the accident that killed Naomi and Chuck Shurley. Their estate had been complicated, though they’d not been wealthy, their personal finances entwined with those of the charity they ran and the churches they’d founded around the world. Their missionary work had been all-consuming, their private and public lives indistinguishable.

The Board of Directors had wanted Castiel and Jimmy to take over Heaven’s Helpers, as if the brothers hadn’t given enough of themselves over the years. Their childhoods had been sacrificed on the altar of doing God’s work. No deity worth worshipping would ask or expect more of them.

Castiel still felt twinges of guilt and selfishness for turning them down, though he had no doubt that he’d made the best choice for himself and especially for Jimmy.

Thinking about their parents should make Castiel sad. He’d loved them, and their deaths in a plane crash had been unexpected and tragic. But in their absence, he and Jimmy were free. The Shurleys had never approved of the twins’ chosen vocation. Writing and illustrating children’s books—especially children’s books with secular messages—was not a suitable careers for the scions of the Shurley family. Castiel and Jimmy were supposed to buy in to the mission, follow the cause, and proselytize to the poor misbegotten heathen masses.

Everyone had assumed that Castiel and Jimmy would do their duty and follow in their parent’s footsteps.

Neither brother had considered it for a moment.

_I don’t care if those sanctimonious, condescending jerks think I’m selfish. That life was imposed on us. We’d never have chosen it, but it never crossed Naomi’s mind that we’d choose anything else, so the option was never given._

_God, it feels good to be able to breathe, to look to the days and the weeks and the years ahead and have no where we have to go, no plane trips looming, no vaccines to re-up, no languages to study, no bible to read unless I want to. And fuck do I not want to._

_Our lives are our own. Finally._

Castiel took up his palette, carefully wet his watercolors, and mixed the base shade he’d need for the grass. Normally, his work was meticulous, every brush stroke precise, but today he wanted to sketch in colors, to capture the verdant beauty of abundant July evident in their lush backyard.

There’d been little rain of late; the pond kept the grass rich and emerald but didn’t provide enough water for the blades to grow, so Jimmy and Castiel had decided not to mow. Spared the blade-shearing trim, the grass had stayed short but wildflowers—ostensibly weeds, though Castiel preferred the blooms to the boring turf—grew in profusion. Tiny white and white-and-pink flowers burst out from patches of clover, little yellow flowers like golden bowls peeked out from among thick leaves, and occasional itsy bitsy purple-blue flowers sprouted with profusion on the lower slope of the hill. In the areas that were harder to mow—the banks of the pond, around the stump of the dead willow—taller wildflowers grew. A brilliant orange cone of flowers that his mother used to complain triggered her hayfever grew bright alongside a plant heavy with spheres composed of dozens of small purplish flowers. Delicate white flowers vined around the shrine that Dean had built on the stump.
Castiel hadn’t seen Dean since they’d moved in. They’d met none of their neighbors, not that they’d made any effort to do so.

In scant strokes, Castiel captured in two dimensions the complex flowerhead of a white, lacy flower composed of a multitude of miniscule blossoms, painted it in profusion amidst the golden cones and the pink-purple spheres. He loved their new home, loved it as a place to live and also as a place from which to draw inspiration. It was colorful and lively, vivacious in a way Castiel couldn’t have explained. Castiel had lived so many places, seen so many plants and peoples and creatures and sights, but the peace he felt in the sultry afternoon with not a soul in sight surrounded by the modest beauty of upstate New York was incomparable.

“Wow, dude, you’re awesome at that!”

Only long practice ensured that Castiel jerked his hand away from his canvas instead of smearing pale pink over his meticulously preserved areas of white. Turning around, he was shocked to see Dean standing behind him, looking over his shoulder. Dean caught Castiel’s chagrin and gave him a sheepish grin, revealing a perfect line of straight, white teeth. Dean’s eyes were greener than the undiluted shade on Castiel’s palette, his skin darkened to deep tan by the sunshine of summer, the bridge of his nose darker yet and peppered with freckles. A sheen of sweat covered his skin, and Castiel felt the sudden, crazy urge to run his hand over Dean’s brow, invite him in, offer him lemonade, introduce him to Jimmy...

Knowing my luck, he and Jimmy will hit it off and I’ll be left a third wheel to manage alone as I might.

Maybe I should keep Dean to myself. It’s not like I have a chance with Jimmy. Maybe Dean would be interested in me, even just as a friend, if he doesn’t meet my brother...

...why would he? Why would anyone?

“Seriously, when I’m up close like this it looks like a mess of colors but when I stand back it’s like looking at a damn garden, down to the last petal. You’re like a fricken wizard or something.” Dean leaned close enough that Castiel could smell him; despite his sweaty, soiled appearance, Dean smelled of the fresh outdoors, like a sun-swept field after a rainstorm with a rainbow stretched overhead, like browned wheat stalks baking in the sunshine, as sweet as bread baking in the oven. Castiel resisted the urge to take a deep breath.

Have I ever noticed how someone smelled before?

It’s not like I have a chance with Dean, either. I’m putting my horse about a mile before my cart. I scarce know him, much less have a clue about Dean’s orientation or interests.

And even if we were better acquainted…I shouldn’t delude myself into thinking I could ever care for anyone but my brother. In a hundred countries and thousands of meetings and partings, I’ve never met anyone to compare with Jimmy, anyone to compete with him for the paramount place in my heart. I’m “James-sexual” and it’s pathetic. Jimmy clearly doesn’t reciprocate. My hang ups are mine – I can’t blame our upbringing, our parents, those surrounding us. Jimmy and I are identical, had identical experiences, and he grew up fine. He’d date Dean, if Dean were interested, without feeling the least guilt that Dean’s also a man, the least regret that he’d passed me over for someone else.

…but wouldn’t it be sweet to think, if only for a few minutes, that I wasn’t deviant? Or at least not that deviant, not so broken that homosexual incest is my only desired outlet? Homosexuality alone is…
...bad enough? Really? I think homosexuality is bad? Jimmy is bi – do I think he’s broken too? No, of course not. I’m broken for thinking homosexuality makes anyone broken. I know better – should know better than to judge anyone on something so superficial. God wouldn’t give men and women such desires, clearly inherent from birth, to then turn around and punish them for feeling as they do. How dare I presume to judge where God would not? How dare I—

“You know a lot ‘bout flowers?” Dean continued, growing hesitant as the silence stretched out.

Right. Of course. Castiel was supposed to answer when people spoke to him, not grow obsessively introspective about things he couldn’t hope to change.

“Very little,” Castiel confessed. For no obvious reason, relief tinged Dean’s expression. “We’ve lived many different places so I’ve never grown more than passingly familiar with the local flora and fauna. My parents didn’t think such things were relevant to our education. Jimmy was curious, so he studied some ecology on his own; he knows more than I.”

“Jimmy is...your boyfriend?” ventured Dean. “Husband?”

“If you’d met him you wouldn’t ask me that,” Castiel said sardonically. “We’re identical twins, Dean.”

“Oh, I know you’re brothers – saw him last time, when that bitch told you to cut down the willow,” said Dean with a laugh. “‘Brothers’ and ‘lovers’ ain’t mutually exclusive.” Dean dropped to a squat that put him more at Castiel’s eye level. Arrested by gorgeous green eyes, earnest and interested and focused, Castiel shifted uncomfortably on the worn cushion of the stool he sat on to paint. From this angle, Dean’s brown hair was streaked with blond like rays of sunshine trapped amidst the strands.

Castiel’s heat-addled brain caught up with what Dean had said. His jaw dropped.


“You keep assuming we’re from the city,” Castiel said with a frown.

“What, you’re not?” Dean scoffed. “Fine. Where are you from?”

“Chicago,” admitted Castiel. Dean’s face twisted into a gotcha expression but Castiel kept talking before he could interrupt. “We lived there scarce weeks out of the year. Our parents were missionaries, and we traveled with them. I’ve lived in cities, yes, but I’ve also lived in hovels festering with vermin, reeking of human waste, in villages without running water, electricity, or a single motorized vehicle. I’m not – we’re not gilded, Dean.”

“But you were able to afford this place...” Dean trailed off suggestively. Castiel grimaced. “Hey, sorry, I get it – we don’t know each other – don’t tell me shit if you don’t want to, I’m just makin’ small talk.”

“It’s fine,” Castiel replied, easing into a smile. Dean’s eyes widened slightly, and Castiel tumbled into green, oddly breathless. Just the heat and humidity thickening the air...obviously... “Our parents died last year, and we came into a modest inheritance as a result. We didn’t want what they wanted, didn’t want to continue their work, so we decided to find a place that suited us and settle down.”

“...and find love?” Dean waggled a suggestive eyebrow. Castiel frowned, unsure if Dean was flirting with him.
“That isn’t a current priority, no,” replied Castiel. This was alarmingly reminiscent of their prior conversation, Dean’s words filled with subtext and innuendo beyond Castiel’s comprehension.

*It’s a good thing he’s so baffling or I might be tempted.*

*No. No temptation. No sexuality. There’s no point. There’s no fixing what’s wrong with me.*

Dean looked a question at Castiel, and Castiel shrugged. “We’ve not been able to do our actual job in sometime; we moved here to refocus on that.” Dean’s head quirked to the side, silently urging Castiel to keep speaking. “We co-create children’s books. My brother writes the text and I illustrate.”

*At least sometimes I can understand what Dean’s getting at…which means I haven’t completely forgotten how to socialize since I stopped interacting with anyone other than Jimmy. A lot is going over my head, but I suspect Dean is simply that confusing.*

“Lemme get this straight. Your parents thought studying the names of flowers was pointless but they were totally cool with you writing kidlit?”

“No, they weren’t,” Castiel replied quellingly. What his parents wanted from them, expected from them, *didn’t matter* anymore. “We did so anyway, and have met with modest success. Enough to live on, especially if we resume publishing new titles.”

“Cool, cool,” Dean nodded. Castiel frowned, skeptical, confused. He felt mocked, though he didn’t know what Dean had said that made him feel so. “No, seriously, that’s awesome. And you’re one hell of a painter. So, you and bro live together, you work together, you travel together...?”

“Ah, it’s a twin fetish,” said Castiel with a sigh. *That* he’d encountered before. “No, Dean.”

“That’s not it.” Something in Dean’s voice arrested Castiel, convinced him instantly that Dean spoke utter truth. Sorrow, Castiel thought, and maybe regret, but that made no sense.

*To be fair, nothing about Dean makes any sense.*

“Sorry, I know I’m pushin’, and like I said, don’t feel obliged or nothin’, it’s just talk,” said Dean solemnly. “But...ya know, historically, ‘round these parts, such things were pretty normal – everyone did it, but no one talked ‘bout it. Winters were long and cold, we got electricity late, and ya did what you had to do to get through a lonely night.”

“Dean, did you—?” Castiel snapped his mouth shut. Just as it wasn’t any of Dean’s business that Castiel had pined for his brother since puberty, Dean’s sexual history was none of Castiel’s business.

Anyway, he was talking about the past, a hundred years ago or more, and he can’t be older than 25...surely he’s a few years younger than Jimmy and I...

“Pssh, talkin’ about you, not me,” Dean deflected with broad, false smile. “Sounds like you’ve seen loads of interesting shit, whereas I’ve lived ‘round here my whole life and I ain’t seen shit. Doubt I got anything to say ‘bout my life that’d interest you.”

“That’s not true,” said Castiel. As confusing as Dean was, as inexplicable, he was gorgeous and there was...*something*...about him that captivated Castiel, something that Castiel couldn’t put his finger on. He wanted to know more, wanted to know everything. “You know about flowers.”

Dean brightened. “That I do! Still can’t believe you don’t.”
“I don’t know anything,” Castiel promised. He slipped his brush into his cup, threads of pink ink diffusing in the sluggish swirl of the water. “Why don’t you tell me?”

“Seriously?” Dean scoffed, his expression growing more surprised when Castiel nodded. “Okay, yeah – sure. So, keep that painting in your head, and I can ID everything you painted – let’s go take a closer look.”

Spryly, Dean leapt to his feet and rushed down the porch stairs. They creaked under his weight, a nail squealing. “Better get that fixed,” suggested Dean, waving at Castiel to follow. Smiling, Castiel took the steps more carefully. Keeping to a nearly imperceptible path where the grass didn’t grow so tall, Dean followed the worn route toward the pond. As they approached the first patch of flowers, Dean dropped to his knees and said, “Clover.”

“Yes, three leaves, I know that one,” said Castiel.

“The flowers are clover – not just the leaves,” Dean corrected.

“I...I had no idea clover grew flowers,” confessed Castiel.

“I figured.” Dean shot him a cocked smile over his shoulder. “That’s why I’m here to give you a plant education. Near everything out here sprouts flowers at some time or other, it’s how they procreate.” Reaching through the undergrowth, Dean cupped a small purple blossom between worn, calloused fingers, dirt worked deeply into the lines at every joint. “These purple ones are creeping Charlie, and the yellow are buttercups. These are all invasives, mind – so damn virulent that no matter how hard we try, they keep coming back. Most of the flowers ‘round here are native, though – used to have way more invasives that the douche bags who lived here before you planted, but we nipped that in the bud.”

“We?” asked Castiel, as Dean popped to his feet once more and headed toward the pond banks in wide strides.

“Me and some of the other locals,” called Dean. “Come on, you gotta see the milkweed – that’s the one with pink flowers!”

Dean’s enthusiasm was contagious. He led Castiel around the pond, pointing out Queen Anne’s lace and goldenrod, aster and campion, spiky thistle and cinquefoil and more than Castiel could keep track of. Up close, amidst the grasses, Castiel was shocked by the profusion of growth and by the variety. Dean knew the names of so many flowers, in so many shades of white and yellow and orange, with splashes of pink and purple and blue. Large blooms splashed color amidst the multitude of shades of green and tan leaves, and small flowers blossomed everywhere, some so tiny Castiel wouldn’t have noticed them if not for Dean’s careful shifting of the surrounding plants. Most had folksy names like meadowsweet and turtle’s head, swallow-wort and Solomon’s seal. Interspersed were some Castiel had seen listed as ingredients in dishes the world over, in herbal teas and tisanes, in country remedies and religious texts: chamomile, vervain, skullcap and mint.

Head spinning, Castiel did his best to keep up, but he was overwhelmed with information before they found a thicket of wild grape tangled around a raspberry bush, and surrendered completely to Dean’s lead when Dean plucked a ripe raspberry and held it close to Castiel’s lips, a silent suggestion that Castiel open wide. Castiel bit into the red berry and delicious, lush juice squished out and flooded over his tongue, simultaneously sweet and tart as store-bought berries never were. Dean caught Castiel’s attention and offered him an unfamiliar trefoil leaf; bitterness that perfectly complemented the raspberry coated Castiel’s mouth. They walked on, Dean plucking a leaf here, a flower there, a berry or two in all the colors of the rainbow, offering them to Castiel and pointing out ones that shouldn’t be eaten.
“I’m not going to remember any of this,” Castiel managed apologetically while chewing a pale sour berry that Castiel’s thoughts insisted on identifying as icy flavored.

“S’ok,” Dean said with a grin. “That’s why I’m here! Just knowing all this shit ain’t nothing, but having someone to share it with is awesome.” He paused and froze, breathless, cheeks flushed brown-red, excitement and heat augmenting his tan. “Are you having fun?”

“Yes,” said Castiel, plucking another of the pale berries and popping it in his mouth. Dean beamed approval. “I’m having a great deal of fun. I had no idea we were surrounded by such...plenty. When I look, all I see is a mountain glade – beautiful, yes, naturally stunning, worth preserving and admiring and reproducing in graphite and ink – but you – you see...” Castiel trailed off, wishing he had Jimmy’s gift with words. “You see friends – the difference between walking into a room where you know no one, and walking into a room of people you love, all familiar, all comforting. You belong here, whereas I’m merely a tourist.”

“Maybe.” Dean half-shrugged. “But a respectful tourist, and one open to learning, and that’s cool.” Casually, Dean leaned down, wrapped a hand grubby with dirt around an unfamiliar shoot, uprooted it and threw the seedling, roots and all, into the murky pond. Castiel shot him a question, and Dean said, “Purple loosestrife. It’s an invasive – you’ve probably seen it, long stems covered in purple flowers, common in marshy areas? Total fucking garbage plant – sure, the flowers are pretty but the roots are shallow and pervasive and they have, like, zero nutritional value. If I let them take root...” Dean trailed off and grimaced. “I’m sorry, this is your land – if you choose to let them take root, they’ll kill the native plants. The animals that depend on those plants – none of which can eat the loosestrife – will leave, and the pond’ll die.”

“Are you a scientist, Dean?” asked Castiel, impressed.

“Gah, fuck no,” Dean laughed, a strangely hollow sound, empty and depressing to hear compared to his authentic laughter earlier. “Just a local schmo with nothing better to do. Come on, you gotta see the bladderwort.”

This was Castiel’s first time close to the pond; from afar, it had looked self-contained, but walking along the bank, the ground was so marshy that it squelched under their weight, water pooling in and around the indentations formed by their shoes. A dense growth of plants that Castiel had arbitrarily called reeds (which had turned out to actually be reeds, unlike all the other plants that Castiel had lumped into the ‘reed’ category) rustled and clattered in the breeze, so tall they blocked much of the house from sight. Close to the water, the air was cooler. A cloud of gnats enveloped Castiel’s head no matter how many times he waved them away and more bugs buzzed through the air with every step they took and every plant they brushed. Oblivious to the irritating swarm, Dean stretched his arms before him and carefully swept a stand of tall plants aside, revealing the bank of the pond a mere foot away. Growing out of the water was a small cluster of yellow flowers, petals edged with white and veined in orange.

“Bladderwort!” Dean announced, triumphant, as if he’d shown Castiel the crown jewels. Flushed with excitement, Dean’s eyes shone brighter than ever. Despite the sweat matting hair to his forehead, the smattering of red patches on his cheeks that promised a sunburn to come, the mud and water staining his jeans to the knee, Dean was gorgeous, perfect, flawless.

I want to paint him, smiling at me just like that, so I can capture that beautiful expression forever. The flower’s petals draped toward the water, crinkled, feminine, and fairy-like. Looking at the bladderwort, looking at Dean’s eyes aglow, Castiel understood where myths of pixies came from. A pair of dragonflies fluttered by, tumbling and flitting together, and landed on the flower. Castiel blinked and felt a moment’s surprise that the flower was yet there when he opened his eyes. Surely
it was ready to take flight, ready to dance through the air and play amidst the rustling reeds.

“It’s very nice, Dean,” said Castiel. “This...everything about this afternoon has been very nice.”

Dean was so proud of his yellow flowers, like he’d shown Castiel something hidden and special, unique and unexpected. He had, in his way; the beauty of the bladderwort was enhanced by Dean’s exuberance. That Dean saw such value in the small flower made them priceless in Castiel’s eyes.

How much time must Dean have spent here to know so many secrets of the area?

Castiel had some suspicions why he and the previous owners had been so antagonistic.

“I’m glad.” Dean smiled, and Castiel’s chest felt tight. A fraught moment passed, Castiel’s head spinning as he tumbled into Dean’s gorgeous gaze.

Most people would be upset to have someone trespass on their private property so frequently.

Is it weird that I’m not upset?

Will Jimmy be upset, when he realizes?

I hope not. I don’t want Jimmy to be upset, but I don’t want to make Dean leave. His love for these plants is obvious. He’s protected the pond from invaders. His devotion is a blessing.

If Jimmy wants to send Dean away, I’ll defend him.

Even against Jimmy.

“Do you...maybe...want to come in and cool down?” stammered Castiel.

“Maybe...maybe some other time,” said Dean regretfully, his ebullience dimming. Castiel could swear the blazing sun had passed behind a cloud, but the sky remained perfectly clear, as blue as the ocean and infinitely deeper.

“You know I truly don’t mind you spending time on our land,” Castiel added.

“Really?” Dean’s excitement reigned. “Oh, awesome. I mean, I thought after the first time we met that we were cool, but...like, you said...but there’s a difference between saying it’s okay and actually, ya know, meaning an invitation like that...and...”

“If you’re truly concerned, I can check with Jimmy, but he’s generally more easygoing than I am,” said Castiel. And if he’s not in this case...

Dean spluttered and burst into laughter. Confused, Castiel met Dean’s gaze. “Dude,” Dean gasped between chuckles. “Dude. You are so chill. You seriously think, what, you’re not easygoing?”

“I’ve been told I’m...” Castiel frowned, fishing for the most apropos of the many insults that had been hurled at him over the years. “Uptight.”

“I suggested you were banging your twin brother and you didn’t chase me off your property waving a shotgun,” said Dean dryly. “You’re positively fucking saintly.”

The term sent a shiver down Castiel’s spine, reminiscent of a lifetime listening to the self-congratulatory, laudatory nonsense spewed by his parents and their arrogant friends at thousands of family dinners, charity events, and praise meetings.
“Never that,” Castiel scowled. “So far from that. I...”

There was a confession on the tip of Castiel’s tongue, you’re right about me. I’m exactly the sinner you name me. If I had my way, I’d climb my brother like a tree, ride him to town like my favorite horse, any of dozens of inappropriate coarse suggestions that have been shouted at me by locals who didn’t appreciate the patriarchal, parochial condescension of our presence.

If Jimmy could be my boyfriend, my husband, I’d ask him in a heartbeat.

But that’s impossible.

“Why...?” Castiel swallowed. No words came. He couldn’t admit the truth, couldn’t ask Dean what had made him suspect that Castiel harbored less than brotherly feelings in his breast.

Dean gave Castiel an understanding smile. Wishful thinking. Stop over-analyzing. “Come on, I’ll walk you back,” Dean said, gesturing for Castiel to lead the way out of the swamp. At least he changed the topic. Water hissed out of the soles of Castiel’s shoes and he grimaced. He’d probably ruined his sneakers. Totally worth it.

They walked side by side in silence, trudging up the slope of the hill until water no longer pooled and flowed beneath their steps. Now that Castiel was paying attention, he spotted numerous different flowers, some whose names he’d learned – goldenrod was so distinctive he doubted he’d ever forget – and some that Dean had identified but whose names hadn’t sunk in, and others that Dean hadn’t told him about yet. Despite that, Dean said nothing, and Castiel didn’t ask. He thought – he hoped – he’d have future opportunities to learn more about the surrounding natural environment from Dean.

After so long in the blazing sunshine, stepping beneath the branches of the willow was as pleasant as walking into an air conditioned room. Castiel swiped his forearm over his face and was surprised when it came away dry, his skin gritty and smeared with white salt stains. Even in the heights of summer, the ground beneath the swaying canopy of the willow tree was bare save for a few bedraggled patches of grass, a carpet of soft dead leaves, and a new bed of flowers surrounding the trunk. The lobed purple blooms that had grown in profusion the month before were gone; in their place grew white and pink poppies, which Castiel only recognized because the Wizard of Oz had been a staple of his childhood, and clustered flower whose thin petals haloed the center of the flower like a starburst, making the flowers appear fuzzy and soft. Castiel longed to pet them, but he feared damaging the blossoms so he stayed his hand.

“Well, it’s been real, Cas,” said Dean behind him.

Surprised, Castiel stopped and turned around. Dean stood beside the tree trunk, one hand curled around a knob in the bark, leaning against it as if fatigued. His smile looked forced and didn’t touch his eyes. The resemblance to how Dean had appeared the first time they met was dramatic, evocative, Dean’s green gaze as brilliant and bright as the sunshine luminescing the green-and-gold of the willow leaves. The leaves grew in such profusion that they hung like a curtaining, separating Castiel and Dean from the rest of the backyard, from the rest of the world.

“If you’re unwell, won’t you come in the house?” Castiel suggested, hesitating, uncertain. Dean flinched as if hurt, and Castiel wished, wished he understood the oddities of his neighbor – of his friend? – and wished he had the courage to flat-out ask what was the matter. “Your presence is no imposition on our land, and no imposition in our lives, and I’ve got fresh iced lemonade...”
“That does sound tasty,” Dean managed, “but I’m good. Thanks, Cas. Later!” He waved awkwardly with his off-hand. Despite the temptation to push, Castiel let the topic drop, turned, and walked toward the house. He used a hand to sweep willow branches from his path, stepping carefully so as not to crush the flowers and leaves that spread protectively over the exposed tree roots. The light outside the shady sanctuary glared and dazzled Castiel’s sight and he paused, blinking, at the transition between the willow’s span and the rest of the lawn.

“Um…”

Surprised, Castiel twisted and glanced back. Dean’s head had dropped, his lips fixed in a tight line, his eyes focused on the forest-like ground. He looked up and Castiel inadvertently gasped, arrested by the impossibility of Dean’s intense gaze.

“About the…about the brother thing…” Dean grimaced, fingers tensing on the tree trunk, bunching the fabric of his jeans. His gaze flicked away from Castiel, staring at something in the distance, and then back. “Just…um…I’ve seen how you look at Jimmy, ‘kay? I’ve been around…like while you were moving in…but I wasn’t sure how you’d react to me now that you’re actually here, ya know? Don’t want to be a bother. But…the two of you are out on the porch pretty often and…you watch him…a lot…and…” Dean looked away again and Castiel felt the loss of his gaze as if a hole had been torn in his flesh, as if he’d lost a limb. “…I know that look,” Dean concluded, voice thick with barely suppressed emotion. “I’ve…I’ve looked that way. At someone I…but I thought…there was never a chance. I didn’t have a prayer. I was…who I am? And he was…who he was? And we were…what we were…to each other.” Tear-filled eyes met Castiel’s. “I waited too long. Don’t wait too long, Cas.”

“Dean—”

“See ya around,” said Dean. Castiel’s gut twisted with sorrow; Dean expression was closed, hard, distant, a contrast to his moving words.
He can’t bring himself to say he loved his brother…but he must have. No other interpretation makes sense in context. I wonder what happened? Was Dean rebuked?

...at least now I know he’s interested in men.

Yes, that’s clearly the most important take away from this conversation. Great job, Castiel.

If he can tell my affections by looking at me, does Jimmy know? Has my brother been humoring me all these years?

At least Dean isn’t condemning me. At least he talks as if he believes how I am is okay. I thought he’d judge me if he knew my sins, knew how far from sainthood I was, but he suspected from the beginning and still acted friendly.

Why has he been watching?

Where has he been watching from?

I should think his behavior is weird. I don’t, but I should.

Shaking his head, shaking off his thoughts, in an effort to deny Dean’s implications, Castiel stepped out of the protection of the branches, walking back to the house. He moved carefully, avoiding patches of flowers, sticking to the worn path that he’d scarce noticed before. Now that he
knew to look for the slight dip in the soil, the stunted appearance of the grass, the way was obvious. Maybe Jimmy would consent to not mow the rest of the yard, to let the flowers and grasses take over and make a sanctuary for the creatures that lived and thrived in their surroundings. They’d still have the front lawn to present a suitable public face to the world; behind closed doors, behind the fence that blocked the backyard from the view of the street, they could maintain their property however they wished.

Behind closed doors, they could live however they wished.

The stairs groaned under Castiel’s weight despite his efforts to step lightly, wood straining and shifting. Something about the noise niggled at Castiel, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. *Dean said we should get this fixed. I wonder if he knows how to do that?* Returning to his stool, he gratefully got off his feet. It hadn’t been a long walk, just around the pond, but the heat was intense, the air thick with humidity, and Castiel was surprised by how winded he was. He felt the wild urge to chug the pink-tinged brush water and quashed it. He’d pretended that the exertion of moving substituted for the runs he used to do, the exercise he got by walking when they’d lived places with no access to transit, but clearly not.

Maybe Dean would go hiking with him.

Just to help him get back into adequate physical shape, of course.

“Bro, you are so gone.”

The gorgeous sound of Jimmy’s laughter startled Castiel, and he jerked around on his stool so quickly that he wrenched his back and nearly tumbled to the porch floor. Jimmy winked at him cockily from the other side of the screen door. There was no air conditioning in the house, and they’d taken to leaving the doors on either end of the central hallway open and running an attic fan to keep the air moving; strands of Jimmy’s hair shifted in the manufactured breeze.

“I’m sorry…?” Castiel looked his confusion at Jimmy, who laughed harder.

“I’ve been standing here waving at you for the past five fricken minutes – I even shouted at one point! – and you didn’t even notice,” managed Jimmy, pausing every few words to catch his breath. “Was that your friend what’s-his-name—”

“Dean.”

“Oh ho, it’s *Dean*, is it? Not Mr. So-and-so?” Jimmy’s eyes twinkled with mischief and pleasure. Castiel scowled. If *Dean had told me his last name, then I’d call him…no, I’d probably still call him Dean.* “So that was him again? Why didn’t he come in? It’s hot as balls out here!”

“I’m not sure what that means,” frowned Castiel. “Are balls very hot?”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “How’re you my brother?”

Don’t ask me – I wish we weren’t brothers…

“I’m not sure,” Castiel deadpanned. “But I suspect our parents had something to do with it, and if we’re *not* twins, that would suggest our identical appearances are some kind of cosmic joke.”

*And I’m the butt of that joke, because I shouldn’t be sexually attracted to someone who looks the same as I. That’s…practically narcissism.*

Except it’s not. I hate myself as much as I love…
Castiel sighed.

“Aw, not a cosmic joke, Cassie,” Jimmy grinned. “Two guys as hot as you? That’s the best kind of accident.”

Stricken, Castiel tried to find an acceptable response. If Jimmy had just said ‘two guys as hot as me,’ forming an appropriate reply would have been so easy. As it was, Castiel’s thoughts raced. Attractiveness depended on so much beyond appearance. Jimmy had lovely features – pronounced cheek bones, a gorgeous jaw line, perfect shoulder blades, Castiel could go on but he forbade himself lest he manifest a most embarrassingly timed erection – but in those respects he and Castiel were identical. While Castiel could appreciate that, objectively, their physiques made them equally physically alluring, Jimmy’s appeal was so much more than how he looked.

Jimmy was brilliant, quick on the uptake, gifted with words, and hard-working. He was versatile as Castiel never had been; everywhere they’d lived, Jimmy found ways to fit in, or at least had carved a comfortable niche for himself. He’d made friends, learned the local languages, found a place to hang out, was ‘one of the gang’ regardless of who was around them or how different they were. Castiel had always been on the outside, always preferred to be alone rather than deal with the awkwardness of trying to integrate. He didn’t dislike new people – in fact, they fascinated him – but he was terrible at relating to them, and the same strangers who found Jimmy’s bumbling attempts to fit in amusing and endearing found Castiel’s social ineptitude rude and off-putting.

“Earth to Castiel.” Jimmy stood before him on the porch. “When you said ‘cosmic joke’ I didn’t realize you were in outer-fricken-space.” Castiel hadn’t even noticed the door opening. A waft of musky cologne made Castiel’s head spin and he sighed again, shoulders slumping with dejection.

Maybe moving in together hadn’t been a good idea. Castiel invariably, depressingly, always thought he was stronger than he actually was. Frowning, Jimmy waved a hand in front of his face.

Do we even speak the same language? Jimmy communicates in words, simple and concise yet clear, so skillfully crafted that he makes what he does look easy. I communicate in pictures, open to interpretation, impossible to quantify.

“I can’t say I blame you,” said Jimmy with an airy sigh and a mischievous smile. “From what I saw, Dean is a babe.

You and he would get along wonderfully. He’s enthusiastic and captivating in all the same ways you are.

“I’ll introduce you sometime.” Castiel couldn’t keep a twinge of sadness out of his voice. A stark vision of the future haunted him: Dean and Jimmy living in the old farmhouse together, Dean sharing his love of nature with someone who could share and enhance his enthusiasm. Castiel would move elsewhere, to an atelier where he could surround himself with paper and ink and paint the world as he wished it was instead of how it truly was.

“What were you two talking about?” asked Jimmy, walking to the porch stairs. He took a single step down, emerging from the shadow of the house into the glaring sunlight, lifted a hand to protect his eyes and froze, grimacing. “Where’d he go?”

“Dean introduced me to our neighbors,” Castiel explained. Quirking an eyebrow, Jimmy looked around, a silent reminder that there wasn’t a house in sight. “Clover flowers,” Castiel clarified, pointing. “And…Charlie something. And goldenrod, and reeds, and cattails. He’s under the willow tree, I think he likes the shade.”

Jimmy tilted his head to one side, turned back toward the tree, and squinted, trying to see through
the brightness, the veil of willow branches, and the sweat pooling beneath his eyes.

“S’not there.”

Frowning, Castiel stepped to the edge of the porch, laid his hands on the guardrail, and looked toward the tree. Light dazzled his vision but even so, it was clear Jimmy was right.

No one was there.

Normally, Castiel would have thought there’d have been no way Dean could leave without Castiel observing his departure. But Castiel had been oblivious to Jimmy calling him, oblivious to Jimmy joining him on the porch, so his judgment and observation skills were undeniably impaired.

*Observation is supposed to be the one thing I’m good at.*

Shaking his head, scattering drops of sweat, Jimmy shot Castiel a cocked smile and stepped back on to the porch. The loose nail on the porch stairs squealed again.

There hadn’t been a creak on the stairs to warn Castiel that Dean had joined him on the porch.

*Or I missed that too.*

“Come on, you look like you could use some lemonade,” said Jimmy brightly.

*Stop thinking about it. All of it. Stop thinking about everything except the one thing that matters.*

“I had an idea for a story,” Castiel broached. Jimmy pulled the screen door open and gestured an invitation.

“Do tell, do tell!”

“It’s about fairies…”

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**Chapter End Notes**

Plants and symbolism for this chapter (plants described in previous chapter end notes are not mentioned again) (see Chapter 19 for links and more information):

Ambrosia Flower (aka common ragweed, buffalo weed): reciprocated love. The "brilliant orange cones," along with goldenrod - the two are often confused.

Aster: love, daintiness, trust, patience.

Bladderwort: no known symbolism. Bladderwort is carnivorous.

Buttercup: humility, neatness, childishness, cheerfulness, wealth. Invasive. The "little yellow flowers like golden bowls."

Campion: youthful love.

Chamomile: money, love, sleep, purification, patience. Invasive.

Cinquefoil: womanhood, maternal love, Mary's womb.
Clover (aka trefoil): Hope, faith, charity, luck, industry, prosperity. Symbol of the trinity because there are three leaflets. Invasive. The small white and pink flowers are clover flowers.

Goldenrod: caution, encouragement, luck, good fortune, hope, love, faith, valor, wisdom. The "brilliant orange cones."

Ground ivy (aka creeping Charlie): hardiness, fidelity, fertility, protection, healing, dependence, endurance, faithfulness, immortality. Invasive. The "itsy bitsy purple-blue flowers."

Honeysuckle: fraternal affection, devotion, happiness, a lover’s embrace, bonds of love. The white flowers vining over the angel shrine are honeysuckle.

Meadow rue: regret, sorrow, repentance. The fuzzy flowers Castiel's longs to touch, blooming beneath the willow.

Meadowsweet: love, peace, happiness.

Milkweed: transformation. The "globes of pink-purple flowers."

Poppy: eternal sleep, oblivion, imagination, sacrifice.

Purple loosestrife: determination, strong will. Invasive.

Queen Anne’s Lace (aka wild carrot): sanctuary. Invasive. The white, lacy flower.

Skullcap: no known symbolism.

Solomon's seal: named after King Solomon, who was granted wisdom by God according to the Torah.

Swallow-wort (aka bloodwort, tetterwort): strength, growth, healing.

Thistle: independence, nobility, warning.

Turtle’s head: no known symbolism.

Vervain (aka verbena): healing, creativity, happiness.

Wheat: abundance, life, fertility, rebirth, resurrection.

Wild Grape: fertility. Grapes are associated with the blood of Christ, particularly the Eucharist. The bitter leaves that Castiel eats are also wild grape.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The farmhouse had been built for a family. The upstairs was warren-like, six tiny rooms carved from what once had been a smaller number of large rooms, connected by narrow hallways and doors in an illogical layout that made the rooms seem even smaller and pokier than they were. Only two of the rooms had closets, tiny nooks scarce wide enough to hold a shirt straight, and those two rooms – on opposite ends of the floor – served as Castiel and Jimmy’s bedrooms. They shared a bathroom, not linked to either bedroom, at the back corner of the house. The location had struck Castiel as odd until he realized it placed the toilet directly over the kitchen sink; when plumbing had been added to the house that must have struck the owners as the easiest way of handling things. More recent inhabitants had added a second bathroom with a shower stall on the first floor, but the upstairs bathroom was original, with gorgeous cracked porcelain fixtures and a deep, claw-footed bathtub.

The interior of the house was painted bright white save for the kitchen cabinets, which were pale wood – maple, Dean had taught Castiel – and the counters, which were worn black Formica. The floors and staircase and banister matched the cabinets, old and beautifully maintained. Castiel was ashamed that he’d not noticed the honeysuckles vining up the hand-carved newels until Dean had pointed out the sweet-smelling flowers where they bloomed around the tree stump and Dean’s strange shrine. More than once, Castiel had walked down to the pond to sketch the wild flowers and found Dean sitting on the edge of the stump or cross-legged on the mossy ground between the rotting roots, whittling on a piece of wood, attention fixed on his work or lost as he stared into the middle distance, his hands working as if he didn’t hold a deadly-sharp knife. He wondered if Dean had carved the newel, but it seemed unlikely. As personable and friendly as Dean was, he invariably refused Castiel’s invitations to come in and, without Castiel being able to point to any specific incident as proof, seemed to be intentionally avoiding Jimmy. When, accepting that Dean would never enter the house for a glass of lemonade or a fresh-baked muffin, Castiel had brought out a tray for the two of them to share, Dean had declined – regretfully, but still a refusal.

That morning, they’d sat by the stump until Castiel had, to his embarrassment, eaten alone every bite he’d intended for two. Castiel had sketched, making copious notes in the margins of the page as Dean identified the flowers that Castiel drew. They stayed together until the day grew hot enough that the honeysuckles retreated in on themselves and turned to sad, wilted buds, until Jimmy called Castiel in for lunch. He shouted an invitation to Dean as well, but Dean declined once more, rose, and as Castiel hiked back to the house, Dean took off purposefully around the pond until the reeds obscured him from view. If he ever came out the other side, neither brother noticed.

As evening finally broke the heat of the August afternoon, Castiel returned to the stump with a watering can. The honeysuckle vines snaked over everything, leaves rustling and swaying though the air was still. Castiel wasn’t sure where the roots were so he liberally watered the area. He didn’t know what Dean’s shrine commemorated, but the crying angel and the sad expressions Dean often shot the sculpture spoke volumes. Castiel would think it a grave if not for the stump guaranteeing that no one had broken earth to bury someone below.

Castiel wouldn’t let the honeysuckle die.

Dean had assured him that the flowers behaved the same every day, every night – that they
retreated from the heat of the baking sun but were renewed by the moon and the lower temperatures – but Castiel worried.

The next morning, the stump was awash in white, pink-edged blooms again. Dean was right, of course Dean was right, but Castiel liked to think the water had helped. The flowers looked brighter, healthier, and stayed open longer. He watered them every evening and the plant thrived. Day by day, the vines grew, extended toward the pond, until they covered the ground from stump to rippling water. Other flowers and plants grew amidst the heart-shaped leaves, a carpet of gorgeous blossoms that filled the air with a redolent, sweet smell.

Internet research told Castiel that the honeysuckle – the *American fly honeysuckle*, specifically – was a native variety that bloomed in the spring.

Thinking back, Castiel could recall the vines, not spread so far, blooming when he and Jimmy first looked at the house in early May.

It had been blooming during the inspection in early June.

It had been blooming when they moved in at the end of June.

It was *still* blooming.

It was August.

“Won’t it choke out the other plants?” Castiel asked Dean tentatively one day. His pencil scritched over the paper, quick strokes as he mimicked in dull gray lines the living angel sculpture that Dean had carved. The honeysuckle had grown among the objects on the stump but no leaves covered the collection, seeming instead to frame each and highlight how special they were.

Impossible. Far more likely that Dean pinches back the branches so that the shrine isn’t covered.

A single rich green tendril curled over the angel’s feet, wound around her back and over her billowing skirts. The vine followed every contour of her figure and highlighted Dean’s masterful carving, spread two heart-shaped leaves in a perfect mirror to her wings, and crowned the tresses that flowed about her face and over her shoulders with a wreath of delicate pink-edged white flowers. It was stunningly beautiful, and try as he might, Castiel couldn’t mimic it in graphite. He tried to tell himself the transience of such a sight was critical to how lovely it was, but in his heart he didn’t believe that. If he were a more skilled artist – if he were as talented on paper as Dean was in wood, as Jimmy was with words – he’d be able to replicate at least a pale imitation of the precious angel of sorrow.

“Nope,” Dean replied. Castiel’s gaze flicked momentarily to Dean; he scarce remembered what he’d asked that had prompted the reply. “Look, so...how should I say...? When an ecosystem is in balance, yeah, occasionally shit happens – keep an eye on the grape vines, for example, if they’re not cut back they’ll kill everything they grow over. It only gets really bad when stuff gets screwed up, though – when non-native plants take root, or when invasives grow, that kind of thing. But a plant like this? The pond is healthy, the plants and animals around it are healthy, this area is healthy, and you and I maintain it and care about it...care for it, I mean...what I’m saying is, the honeysuckle won’t take over. What’d be the point?”

Castiel glanced at him and frowned. Dean had set his carving aside, the knife and half-done sculpture in his lap, the details of a honeysuckle blossom emerging from the dead hunk of wood as if by magic. One of Dean’s hands pet through the leaves like Castiel might have pet a cat. Dean’s gaze was fixed on Castiel’s page, lips twisted appreciatively.
“In the same way the willow tree wouldn’t burst the septic system because doing so would corrupt the soil?” asked Castiel.

Nothing Castiel read on the internet suggested that Dean’s belief in the purposeful growth of plants was true. Castiel had found plenty of instances of willows doing substantial damage to homes and property. Indeed, as their inspector had warned, willows did a disproportionate amount of damage compared to other types of trees. Though Castiel and Jimmy had not yet hired a professional to give a second opinion, the online consensus was that the willow – any willow planted close to a home or a vulnerable landscaping feature such as the pond – should go.

“Exactly!” Dean beamed.

Castiel couldn’t imagine destroying the willow tree. The mere thought made him feel ill.

The conversation mirrored many that he and Dean had. Jimmy thought Dean was a nature-loving hippie dude who lived in a cabin in the woods, subsisted off the land, shunned electricity, and probably hadn’t showered in a year. Castiel wasn’t sure where Dean lived, but he didn’t smell like he’d neglected personal hygiene for an extended time. He smelled good, like earth and sunshine and growing things, and though there were always smudges of soil on his clothing and dirt caked dark in the creases of his hands, Dean never seemed filthy.

When asked which of the local homes was his, Dean declined to answer, and when asked where he lived, Dean shrugged casually and said, “Around.”

Odds were that Jimmy was right, or that Dean was homeless, for Castiel couldn’t think of another reason for Dean’s secrecy and his tendency to disappear and reappear at whim. Castiel recalled his mother’s voice, you have to watch out for those kinds of people: rootless, community-less, outsiders no matter where they claim to live. Society was built on social pacts and Naomi had insisted that people like Dean existed outside those social pacts, that their existence endangered those pacts, but however confusing Castiel found Dean, he never felt threatened by Dean.

“Do you think I’m, I don’t know, under reacting?” Castiel exploded one night over dinner. Jimmy looked at him in confusion, forkful of chicken halfway to his mouth. “About Dean. Isn’t it weird that he’s just...here? He asked permission to fish yesterday, and today he was down there with a pole which looked to be little more than a stick and some thread. I don’t understand him. I wish you’d meet him, Jimmy, I know you’d figure out whatever it is I’m missing.”

“I want to meet him, Cassie, but I don’t think he wants to meet me.” Jimmy bit off a chunk of chicken and smirked at Castiel as he chewed. “I can only assume you’re telling him all the worst things about me.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Castiel replied defensively. “I—”

“Kidding, dude, I’m kidding.” Jimmy laughed. “I know you love me.”

No, you don’t know that.

If only you did.

I don’t mean that. God, what would happen if you knew?

Maybe Castiel could take up residence in Dean’s secluded cabin when Jimmy and Dean finally met and hit it off. At least if he didn’t have electricity or internet access or his brother to distract him, he’d get more drawings done.
Every mystery that Dean presented Castiel with, he channeled into his art. The sketches that filled Castiel’s pages provided the inspiration that produced magic on canvas when Castiel returned to his studio after spending hours in the fields and forest. Castiel had shared his vision of a book about flower fairies. Jimmy was enthusiastic about the idea, and though the topic was well-worn, it was also well-loved, and their agent had agreed to try to find an editor to publish their take on a book about the magic of the garden.

While Jimmy poured over every nuance of every word and sentence, Castiel created the pixies he’s envisioned in his surroundings. A dragonfly clutching a bladderwort bloom transformed into a winged creature – not humanoid, not feminine or male despite the sweep of its petaled skirt. Honeysuckle blossoms became bloomers on a person made of sticks, their torso enfolded in heart-shaped leaves. Goldenrod sprinkled sparkling golden dust over everything, glittering like sunshine off the ripples of the pond, animating every creeper and husk, enchanting acorns into whirly-gig houses and lily pads into stepping stones that ascended to the clouds. A turtle transformed into an armored knight, his lance a thistle thorn, his shell adorned with a duckweed coat of arms. Castiel had always drawn realistically, so much so that their agent had more than once told him to loosen up, that his style wasn’t suited to children’s books, but here, in this place, in this time, Castiel’s imagination took flight.

No.

Castiel’s imagination was grounded, tied to the natural world surrounding them. He’d always been fixated on people and buildings, on monuments and sculptures and fine art. Now, he was obsessed with green. He’d never used so much viridian paint in his life, and he’d scarce begun the works that would actually compose their book. Dean had opened Castiel’s eyes, cast a spell on him, and everywhere Castiel looked, he saw magic.

I wish he’d open up to me like the flowers that seem to open up at the brush of his fingers. I wish he’d tell me what troubles him, and tell me how I might help. He’s given me such a profound gift.

There must be something I can do for him in return...

Dean never shared more of himself, and Castiel couldn’t pry further than he already had. Try as he might, he found no way to return the wonderful favor that was Dean’s company, Dean’s intensity, Dean’s friendly regard. The summer passed, the heat began to wane, the leaves of the trees crisped and colored around the edges, the winds carried the first traces of fall, and August slipped sultry into September.

The honeysuckle continued to bloom.

Small talk was a form of torture that wasn’t sanctioned by the Geneva Convention, but God, it should be. Making meager conversation with strangers with whom they had almost nothing in common reminded Castiel evocatively of the endless, constant charity functions they’d attended with their parents, and, more recently and viscerally, of the funerals and pass-the-torch ceremonies that had been an unfortunate, necessary part of extricating themselves from their parents’ missionary work. Castiel longed for when he was young and his being a wallflower could be shrugged off, excused as youthful shyness instead of obtuse social ineptitude.

“My brother tells me you’ve lived in the area your entire life?” Castiel said hesitantly. The man had asked Castiel nothing about his life, which put the onus of coming up with conversation topics on Castiel.

“Ayup,” the man – Bender was his last name, Castiel hadn’t caught his first name – gave Castiel a
gap-toothed smile, absently scratching at his scruffy salt-and-pepper beard. “Nigh on 60 years now. You boys have – what’s it called – e-ter-net?” Castiel nodded. “Pssh, lucky to have e-lec-tri-cy. Only got it at our place few years back. Don’t know how good you got it!” A rotten smell accompanied the wash of the man’s noxious breath over Castiel’s face and it was all he could do not to recoil.

Castiel had no idea why he let Jimmy talk him into having a Labor Day barbecue for the neighbors.

A strong hand clapped Castiel on the shoulder, and Jimmy’s voice spoke deep and alluring beside Castiel’s ear. “It’s true,” Jimmy lied glibly. “The two of us? Lap of luxury our whole lives. Never had a single flea bite, never drank cholera-laced water, never even been out of range of a cell phone tower in twenty eight years. What even is a tick? Could you just die?” Castiel watched, stunned, as Jimmy shot the hillbilly a smile that belied just how many times they had drunk cholera infected water, and worse, and gave an over-emphasized, effeminate wave of his hand. “Did you have to share beds for warmth?”

Castiel and Jimmy had shared a bed more times than Castiel could count. Jimmy’s fingers dug into Castiel’s shoulder and with a sharp inhale of Mr. Bender’s rank, unwashed fetor, Castiel was thirteen again, huddled close to his sleeping brother to share body heat and cling to the tenuous illusion of safety. Awake, he’d never have embraced Castiel so tenderly.

Jimmy lowered his voice to a conspiratorially and whispered, “I’ve heard you can catch the gay that way.”

Mr. Bender guffawed.

Castiel felt sick.

Lying beside Jimmy as a scared boy scarce into puberty, Castiel had wondered if what Jimmy now suggested was the case. Castiel could think of no other reason why he was gay. Surely something so terrible didn’t just happen, there had to be a cause. Drinking contaminated water led to the diseases that superstitious, uneducated locals ascribed to myriad causes. Likewise, cuddling Castiel’s brother led Castiel to…he’d not wanted to believe it, but there was always a reason.

That’s what Naomi said, with a sympathetic shake of her head. It wasn’t necessarily someone’s fault they were gay – they’d been abused, or exposed to pornography too young, or fallen in with the wrong crowd. Such events were tragic, but with proper contrition, salvation could still be achieved.

Naomi and Chuck hadn’t been virulently anti-homosexual, not like some sects, some missionaries, some locals they crossed paths with. Sodomy was a sin – one need look no further than the name, evoking Sodom, to understand that – but sins could be admitted, sins could be atoned for, sins could be forgiven, and no one was so lost that they couldn’t walk in the light of the Lord’s mercy once more. Or, put another way, so long as “sodomites” repented and refrained from ever indulging their deviance again – accepted that the only way they could be forgiven for their preferences was a lifetime of celibacy, self-denial and loneliness – there was no reason that people on the QUILTBAG spectrum couldn’t be accepted into the fold.

Back then, Castiel had wept as he’d lain awake, Jimmy’s midnight wood pressed against Castiel’s leg, Jimmy’s voice alluring as he leaked needy noises in his sleep. Whatever phantom haunted Jimmy’s dreams excused his inappropriate behavior – she was probably buxom, gorgeous, mature, brilliant, a musician or writer or artist more skilled than Castiel could ever hope to be – but Castiel had no excuse for his erection. He was turned on because Jimmy, his brother, his twin, another man, rubbed against him.
In retrospect, Castiel knew that sharing a bed hadn’t “infected him with the gay.” Even in his youth, when he wasn’t hormonal and afraid he’d never believed their parents’ nonsense about homosexuality; he’d watched the real people he met, seen how they lived varied gender and sexual identities, and saw clearly that people were people, no matter who they were attracted to or what gender they identified as. Jimmy was openly, exuberantly bisexual, and Mr. Bender would likely not still be laughing if he knew that, and Castiel was…

Well, he supposed he was gay, but he’d only ever been attracted to one person.

*It’s okay to be straight, or gay, or bi like Jimmy is. But to be what I am? That’s not okay. There is nothing okay about my feelings.*

Blinking slowly, forcing another deep breath despite the growing toxic cloud of Bender’s gingivitis breath, Castiel was shocked to find an image painted in vivid detail across his eyelids: Dean, cheeks crinkling with delight, standing beneath the willow tree, cupping a beautiful funnel-shaped orange lily, its pistils shedding brown pollen over his hands. As Castiel watched, the sepals spread into green-fingered hands, the pistils lengthened into legs, the petals flared into fiery wings, the flower took flight and Dean laughed, deep voice carefree and gorgeous. The vision disappeared as soon as he opened his eyes again, replaced by the reality of Mr. Bender, his eldest son now beside him, both yet laughing at Jimmy’s witticism.

Dean was beautiful.

Maybe Castiel had been attracted to two people.

“Do you know Dean?” Castiel interrupted breathlessly. Both Benders stopped laughing, exchanged a confused look, and turned matching stares on Castiel. Jimmy’s fingers dug painfully on Castiel’s shoulder.

“Who?” drawled the son. His name was either Jared or Lee; the introductions had been so quick that Castiel hadn’t caught which name went to which brother.

“The only one of our neighbors we met before today,” Jimmy explained, a tightness Castiel couldn’t fathom in his voice, matching the tension of his grip. “Handsome young man, lived ‘round here his whole life, has a funny habit of wandering on to our property but seems harmless aside from an aversion to interpersonal relationships?”

“What’s that mean?” Mr. Bender asked, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

“You know how you mountain types are – wary of strangers, keep to yourselves…” Jimmy hastily explained. “Totally understandable, all things considered.”

“Never met a Dean,” Jared or Lee said the name like it was a foreign word. “There was a fella used to wander onto our property from time to time…”

“He’ll never do that again,” Mr. Bender piggy-backed onto what his son said, and both broke into inappropriately loud laughter, clapping each other on the back. Confused, Castiel glanced at Jimmy, but his brother looked as baffled as Castiel felt.

“Don’t know nothin’ ‘bout anyone name o’ Dean,” Mr. Bender continued, still chuckling – more giggling, as odd a word as it was to apply to a sound coming from a man who must be pushing sixty. “But you two young’uns have any problems with him, you let us know – pest control is our specialty.”

“Got a wood chipper, too,” chimed in Jared-or-Lee, “and a chain saw – helped take down a dead
tree for the previous owners a few years back – good, cheap rates!”

The world lurched and spun, Jimmy’s hand on Castiel’s shoulder the anchor that kept him upright. The stump in the backyard loomed large, the beauty of the shrine, the angel Dean had carved weeping for a lost son, and though Castiel couldn’t connect the dots, he knew in his heart these things were related to each other.

“Excuse me,” he managed. “I need to…go.” He tore himself from Jimmy’s grip, tottered, knees weak, and headed for the door to the back porch.

“Cassie?”

Their living room was littered with clusters of chatting people, most more polite and more cleanly than the Benders, and several looked up with obvious concern as Castiel barged across the room, ignoring Jimmy calling after him. The hallway felt infinitely long, the fresh air of the outdoors a fantasy, as magical and impossible as the pixies that flitted about his paintings. The air in the room was close; the reek of Mr. Bender’s breath made a fetid cloud that followed Castiel, surrounded him, suffocated him on stale cigarette smoke and tooth decay.

The runner they used to wipe their shoes bunched under Castiel’s feet and he tripped into the back door, slammed it open, and stumbled onto the creaking porch. A desperate breath scarce seemed to fill his lungs; his vision of the mild, overcast day dulled to a narrow point of gray in a sea of black, and he choked on the sound of the Benders laughter chasing him, chasing him…

“Breathe, brother!” barked salvation in his ear.

Nails dug like claws into Castiel’s wrists, seized his arms, pulled them back from his face – when had he put his hands on his face? – and the pinprick in the infinite distance at the end of the tunnel of his vision showed him Jimmy’s piercing eyes, bluer than the sky, more beautiful than the forget-me-nots that Dean had found growing in a patch on the far side of the pond. With a ragged gasp, Castiel’s vision snapped into focus. The world rushed toward him, crashed in around him, a runaway train escaping into daylight after eons in a mountain tunnel. He stumbled to his knees, nearly dragging Jimmy down with him.

What the hell just happened to me?

“Breathe!” Jimmy repeated forcefully, gaze commanding Castiel’s full attention. Jimmy inhaled, and Castiel mimicked him; Jimmy breathed out with an exaggerated whoosh, and Castiel let his breath leak out, slowly deflating. He felt flat, empty, wrung out, exhausted, his head yet spinning. Jimmy guided him through several more breaths, his grip not relaxing until Castiel finally put a hand to the deck and pushed himself to his feet.

“I’m alright,” said Castiel, looking out over their backyard. The sweep of the hill seemed to frame the stump, to draw the eye to it; honeysuckle blossoms made a cape of flowers down the angel’s back. Dean’s absence made Castiel’s heart ache; he wanted Jimmy with him, wanted Dean with him, wanted the two to finally meet even knowing that the eventual, inevitable result of such an encounter would be Castiel’s marginalization.

But if Dean were here those vile people would see him.

Thank God Dean isn’t here.

“What’s going on, Cas?” asked Jimmy. Though they no longer touched, Jimmy’s hands were yet outstretched, and his swayed and dodged in time to every movement that Castiel made, ready to
catch Castiel should he fall. Watching him made Castiel dizzy.

“I…I don’t know…” Castiel licked his lips. Admitting even a fraction of the truth would sound insane. It wasn’t a lie; he didn’t know why the Benders words, their laughter, had given him a panic attack.

He was insane. People who had panic attacks were crazy. That’s what his parents had said the first time he had one, when he’d realized he was gay, when he’d realized he could never, ever tell them the truth. Blinking back tears, Castiel stared out at the shrine Dean had built, stomach twisting with empathy to think how much that tree had meant to Dean. Dean loved this pond, this land, more than any of the people who’d lived there had, far more than Castiel could imagine loving anyone save Jimmy, and those men had been laughing about cutting it down and—

“Is this about the tree?” Jimmy followed Castiel’s gaze toward the water, toward the angel. A breeze stirred the reeds, a transitory drizzle rippled the pond, promising heavier rain to come, and Castiel breathed. “Dude, I knew you were going naturalist native on me, but I had no idea how much Dean was rubbing off on you.” Castiel opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, Jimmy continued, “I mean, I figured he was rubbing something off on you, a love of wood, ya know, but not—”

“You’re wrong,” Castiel interrupted. His voice was harsh in his own ears, guttural in a way Jimmy’s never was. Castiel hated it, hated how aggressive and distant he sounded. “My relationship with Dean is nothing like that.” Anger surged through him, hot and head-spinning, made more powerful by his lingering vertigo. He shoved Jimmy away from him hard, wheeled, nearly fell on his face, and only a white-knuckled grip on the porch bannister kept him upright. “I can’t believe you’d think that I…that I…”

…that I could love anyone but you!

He gagged on the words.

He expected an explosion. He expected anger. He expected Jimmy to grab him, to get in his face, to demand that he explain himself.

Silence stretched out.

Castiel’s nerves wound tighter and tighter.

Dean thinks I should tell Jimmy the truth…

The boards beneath Castiel’s feet shifted subtly and creaked. The back door opened and slammed shut with a clatter of loose metal and bug screen.

…it’s too late, far too late. If there ever was a chance for us – which of course there never was, how could there have been? – it was 15 years ago when we were both scared, lonely, isolated children. Jimmy never felt as I did. Jimmy never needed me. He’s comfortable in a crowd. I’ll bet anything he comes out of this barbecue with a new SO. Supporting me is a burden, one he’s shouldered unfairly his whole life, and I’m amazed he’s put up with me so long.

Castiel gripped the railing until his muscles knotted and he could scarce flex his fingers, but he didn’t consider going back inside. Though a crowd of their neighbors filled their living room and kitchen, Castiel was profoundly alone in the house.

Uncurling his fingers from about the bannister one by one, Castiel stepped onto the lawn as the first rain drops fell.
The flowers and the reeds and the grasses and the willow would understand.
Castiel never felt alone when he was with them.

“Alright, what about this one?”

Dean leaned down, scooped a browned leaf from the forest floor, and passed it to Castiel, scarce glancing at it.

Frowning, Castiel inspected the leaf. It cracked between his fingers as he rubbed it, a lobe flaking off. To Castiel’s surprise, the broken piece stuck in his finger, a tiny thorn on the tip of the protrusion sticking in his flesh. Most of the trees were shedding their leaves. With Dean’s help, Castiel had learned to identify the plants by their leaves, their stems, their barks. He’d learned that the trees on their property whose leaves were growing brilliant yellow and red and orange as September cooled into October were maples, those browning were oaks, the ones along the border between meadow and forestland with the white bark peeling back were birches and that Castiel, if he was careful, could flatten the thin bark that flaked off the trunk and paint on it.

In the past, Castiel had found hiking dull, an unending view of similar tree trunks whose aesthetics were largely lost on him and whose minor differences communicated no meaning. Stepping into his backyard had been akin to standing amidst a crowd of strangers, where Dean saw familiar faces. Dean had tirelessly, selflessly introduced Castiel to his “friends,” and Castiel was amazed by how well he learned. He learned the species, but he also learned specific plants, specific trees, their features, their quirks – the pine that had been split by lightning and now grew as almost two separate trees, the elm that had grown over an enormous chunk of stone that might have fallen from the sky it bore so little resemblance to the surrounding terrain, the hemlock that had been half torn from the ground, its roots ripping up the soil around it in an enormous circle, yet still grew, still lived, still thrived. Castiel was ashamed of how little attention he’d previously paid, but Dean was infinitely patient, understanding, and happy to educate him.

Castiel wished he had something, anything, to share in exchange.

The prickly ends of each lobe identified the leaf in Castiel’s hand, and the plant it came from was…

“Here,” Castiel said, tromping through fallen twigs and dead leaves that crunched and snapped beneath his weight. The enormous holly tree stood out in the forest. Overhead, the canopy blocked so much light that few shrubs survived in the shade but the holly thrived, leaves deep green, lustrous and shiny. The branches shook, and though the leaves obscured the trunk, so many animals and birds engorged themselves on the red berries that the branches bounced and swayed and it sounded like the tree itself twittered with birdsong.

“Awesome.” Dean looked over his shoulder and grinned. “You’re a fast learner, Cas.”

They hiked in silence for some time. The forest was dense, and while it was technically private property, Dean assured Castiel that none of the owners cared so long as the hikers who traversed the land were respectful and didn’t damage the forest. There was no path, and the trees hid the sky from view, but Dean never got lost. Sometimes, they’d follow an old stream bed, or what Dean identified as animal runs but were scarce distinguishable from the rest of the forest to Castiel, and once they’d found a ridgeline of exposed, striated bedrock, the margins hidden by shallow dirt that somehow gave enough support for a forest of stunted, scrubby pine trees, but usually they forged their own way. Each hike, Castiel learned more landmarks, until sometimes he could find his own way and didn’t need Dean’s gestures to tell him when to turn or where to go.
The first few hikes, nerves had twanged under Castiel’s skin. What if they got lost? What if Dean was secretly the Unabomber or a serial killer or a thief? What if one of them got hurt? What if a freak storm rolled in, or a tree fell? But though Dean had never so much as told Castiel his last name, or where he lived, Castiel found it impossible to be suspicious of him. Dean was utterly ingenuous, sincere, and open. Save Jimmy, Castiel didn’t think he’d ever met anyone so guileless. A lifetime of warnings, a lifetime of travel to strange and sometimes dangerous places, had drilled into Castiel’s mind: don’t stray from home alone, don’t trust strangers, don’t trust locals, don’t trust anyone but family, stay in the compound, stay safe.

Dean would never hurt him.

Dean would never hurt anyone.

For goodness sake, Dean had once led Castiel a quarter mile out of their way to avoid disturbing a mother pheasant and her chicks. Dean would lengthen his stride or alter his course so as not to crush a sapling. He was gentle, kind, thoughtful, caring, enthusiastic. He loved nature with an ardor few felt for their own families.

Loving nature wasn’t the same as loving people.

Dean still hadn’t met Jimmy, still refused to come in the house, and Castiel had no idea what the issue was.

Fall was well and truly begun, more evident the higher up the mountain they climbed. The trees were a rainbow of colors, some yet green, others brown, orange, yellow, fiery red, and one – Dean said it a sweetgum tree – was a brilliant deep purple. Leaves swirled to the ground, a gentle rain that filled the air with a constant, quiet rustling susurration that was different from the familiar sounds of birds and animals and insects, distinct from the faint whisper of leaves and branches underfoot as they settled slowly in their inevitable decay.

Dean stopped so abruptly that Castiel fell on his rear end rather than collide with Dean’s back. Looking around, his eyes narrowed, Dean tilted his head to one side and frowned.

“What is it?” asked Castiel, mimicking Dean’s concerned glances. He saw nothing out of the ordinary. The woods were quiet, calm, familiar, and—

A crackling bang shattered the serenity – a gun shot, more familiar to Castiel than the cacophony of birdsong that answered it. A flock of crows squawked and took flight from the branches of a nearby tree, wings beating, a shower of dried dead leaves and feathers accompanying them. A deer Castiel hadn’t noticed bounded further up the slope. Dean flinched as if he were in pain, shook his head, muttered under his breath, and made a sharp turn, leading them in a new direction, away from where the shot had been fired from.

Since the Labor Day barbeque, Castiel had become more aware of where they didn’t walk, as well as where they did. Meeting the neighbors had given Castiel a mental map of property lines to overlay on the seamless, unfenced woods.

The shot had come from the direction of the Bender farm.

Now that Castiel thought about it, they’d never gone near that farm. Occasionally – rarely – Castiel caught glimpses of neighboring homes through the screen of tree cover. They’d passed a well-tended river stone home many times, caught sight of an attractive blue-sided house a couple times, and there was a collapsed barn in the middle of apparently virgin woodland, speaking to a past when the area was more heavily cultivated. Mostly, though, the thickets and ravines and slopes
were uninhabited.

“The Benders seem…old fashioned,” Castiel tentatively broached. The echoes of the shot had long faded, the woods calm and tranquil once more, but Dean froze and seemed to scent the air, expression wary.

“They’re dangerous,” Dean replied, sharp, angry. “Stay away from them.”

“They said they didn’t know you…?” Castiel trailed off. He’d never heard Dean angry, truly angry before – offended, offensive, standoffish, aggressive, yes, but this was different. There was fury gruff in Dean’s voice and his face darkened, brow furrowed.

“Fuckin’ liars, too,” snarled Dean. “They—” He snapped his mouth shut so hard his teeth clicked.

“I’m sorry,” murmured Castiel soothingly. “I didn’t mean to…I didn’t realize mentioning them would upset you so much.”

*I should have realized. Dean obviously loved that willow tree and they destroyed it.*

“Fuck…don’t apologize, Cas.” Scrubbing down his face with a hand, Dean’s shoulders slumped and he turned a sad smile toward Castiel. “You didn’t do nothin’ wrong. ‘Course you’re curious. I know I’m fuckin’ weird. Most people won’t even talk to me, just assume I’m some fuckin’ psycho creeper.”

“I don’t think that,” said Castiel.

“I know you don’t.” Dean’s smile brightened and Castiel was surprised at the familiar tightness in his chest, affection and uncertainty and worry and interest and a glimmer of attraction that he usually only felt around his brother. “ ‘s why you’re the one I…I mean…” Dean looked away. “I don’t… really try?… I don’t try anymore. S’not worth it. Back when Bobby was still ‘round… and Jody’s good folk but… fuck.” Dean shook his head, drew a hand over his mouth, and stretching his jaw down until his lips smacked back together.

“Never tell me anything you don’t want to,” Castiel said. “I promise, I swear, I don’t mind. You are who you are. That’s good enough for me.”

There was an awkward pause, and Castiel wondered if his sincere expression had betrayed too much of the feeling roiling through him. Finally, Dean shook his head again and resumed walking.

“Thanks, Cas,” he muttered, so softly that Castiel wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly.

They walked on through the woods. A crisp breeze brought the musky smell of rotting leaves, a constant reminder of the cycle of life being played out ad infinitum around them. It was a nice day, one of the coldest since they’d moved to the area, and Castiel made a mental note to research what weather awaited them in October, November, and beyond. He’d thought the wardrobe that Jimmy and he had brought, assembled piecemeal over the course of their travels, would be adequate to brave the Adirondack winters but, shivering as a gust dispelled the heat accumulated between Castiel’s body and his fleece, he had doubts. Jimmy was nearly done with the text for the book and Castiel had most of the individual art pieces done. The screenshots sent back and forth with their agent and editor had been approved, the book officially bought, the paperwork signed and notarized. They’d have an advance soon. Their small inheritance had gone into the house, and their savings was nearly depleted, but once their pay came through they could afford down coats, and enough pellets to run their stove all winter, and maybe pay someone to improve the weatherproofing on their windows and the insulation in the attic, and…
He sighed. There would always be more that needed to be done, always another expense, but so long as they kept working, so long as Jimmy kept writing and Castiel kept producing art, they’d be okay. Even if their publishing careers fell through, they could get jobs. The area was depressed but they’d lived enough places where hard labor was a fact of day-to-day life that neither brother was afraid to get their hands dirty.

Unless Jimmy meets someone and leaves me…or brings them to the house and forces me out…at least he didn’t start dating one of the people at the barbecue. I know how it will go when he does – so reasonable, the house has six bedrooms, small as they are, plenty for each of us to take a spouse and still have room to spare for any children. Why shouldn’t we all continue to live together, one big, happy family? But even if Jimmy wed someone who could accept a creepy identical twin hanging around and mooning over their husband, I could never stay. I want him to be happy but staying with him, watching him be happier without me, is more than I can bear.

“Everything okay?” Dean asked suddenly. A startled squirrel chittered at them from a tree as they walked by. Castiel made a non-committal, confused noise. Things weren’t okay, they never were, but then again, everything was fine. “Situation normal: all fucked up,” as Uriel, a veteran who’d worked with their parents, used to say. Nothing was wrong that hadn’t always been wrong, and a lot was right that had never been right while his parents were alive. Castiel was happy, for the most part.

“Sorry,” mumbled Dean, “just like you said, don’t say nothin’ you don’t want to.” He paused again, then continued as if compelled. “Heard you and your brother arguin’ a few weeks back…haven’t seen him around as much since then. And now…I dunno, you seem down. Not that I’m great shakes at guessin’ how people feel but…yeah, crap, just ignore me.”

“It’s okay, Dean,” said Castiel with a sad smile that Dean couldn’t see as he led the way through a boggy area, carefully skirting the few plants yet growing out of the mud. “You’re right. Jimmy and I had an argument. He, um, he thinks you and I are…you know…but I’m not sure. Something.”

“We’re friends…?” Dean shot Castiel a confused look, and Castiel shrugged. Jimmy would be amazed; apparently Castiel wasn’t the only person on the planet who missed blatant innuendo after all.

“He thinks you and I have an intimate relationship,” Castiel clarified.

“Take it you haven’t talked to him about…that…yet?”

“No…” Castiel sighed. “You said you waited until too late to tell…to tell your brother? About how you…you know…” Castiel trailed off.

Dean echoed Castiel’s sigh, stopped walking, and slumped against the broad trunk of a tall tree, leaves so high out of sight that Castiel didn’t realize it was an oak until an acorn plonked Dean on the head. Dean scowled and rubbed the spot, opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, closed it again. Whatever fight he was playing out in his head, he gave up and slid down to a squat, leather jacket scraping against the rough bark. Looking up, he caught Castiel’s eyes and he nodded.

Though Castiel had more to say, no words came. Dean’s reaction, his surrender, his obvious shame, cut Castiel through. Every action, every gesture, every blink, and every secret, forbidden emotion Dean’s downcast eyes hinted at – every aspect of Dean’s behavior was familiar. Something inside Castiel crumbled, fractured, and a tear streaked down Castiel’s face.

Castiel had suspected Dean’s attachment but now he knew.
Someone else had been through what Castiel went through every day – the guilt, the embarrassment, the years of failed attempts at repression, the jealousy, the sorrow and the loneliness and the certain knowledge of wrongness that couldn’t dissipate the feelings, the toxic cocktail of everything Castiel tried to fight against but never, ever succeeded at destroying…

…Castiel wouldn’t have wished his experiences on anyone but…

…but Dean understood.

Knees weak, Castiel collapsed, weeping.

“Cas…” said Dean sadly. Only a few feet separated them, but tears blurred Castiel’s vision, choked noises he couldn’t hold back any longer wracked his chest, and his first warning that Dean had moved was the feel of rough fingers skimming over his cheek.

“No…don’t…” Castiel shook his head, drops scattering to patter like rain on the detritus layered on the forest floor. Castiel didn’t deserve a hug, and Dean shouldn’t be forced to emotionally exert himself because Castiel was a wreck. Dean had his own crosses to bear, and didn’t have to shoulder Castiel’s as well. Dean’s hand fell away, and though Castiel had thought he’d feel better without the contact, something twisted tight in his chest, a vise around his heart, and he dropped his head into his hands and cried. An over-loud thunk spoke to Dean’s head hitting the trunk behind him.

“I love Jimmy,” Castiel managed around a hiccup and another burst of tears. Saying the words aloud, hearing his broken voice speak what he’d never admitted to a soul, felt like a weight lifting off his shoulders, felt like the world crashing down around him. “I do! I know it’s wrong, but I can’t help it, I can’t, even though I want to…I’d stop feeling this way if I could, I would, you know that, right? Right?”

“I do,” acknowledged Dean. Castiel blinked, wiping moisture from his eyes, and took in a blurred vision of Dean’s sincere, troubled, sympathetic expression. “I’d’ve said the same. But now…”

“What happened to…to him?” God, Castiel didn’t even know Dean’s brother’s name. Suddenly, it seemed of paramount importance that Castiel know, that he acknowledge Dean’s loss as Dean and his brother deserved, that he pay homage. “The angel – she’s weeping for her son, your brother – that’s a shrine to him.”

“Yeah,” Dean confirmed. “I had to do something, ya know? I can’t forget him, so why should anyone else get to? ‘cept they have. The world moved on. Guess that’s what happens.”

“I won’t forget him, if you tell me…” Castiel scrubbed the tears from his face, trying and failing to pretend that more weren’t falling, and watched Dean’s shifting expressions.

“Sam,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes shut. When he opened them again, they were brilliant bright, filmed wet with tears, as beautiful as Castiel had ever seen.

More beautiful than Jimmy?

Maybe…maybe equally beautiful.

God, I want to kiss him.

“My brother’s name was Sam, and my mother’s name was Mary, and we never had a dad and didn’t need one. Ma died years ago, and Sam…Sam was murdered. Didn’t even leave a body. I, uh…I can’t talk about this…more…okay?” Dean pleaded.
“Of course not…of course…” Castiel said, horrified. “I’m sorry – so sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“Stop!” Dean interrupted, not unkindly. “You asked, and I told you. That was my choice. You’re a pretty awesome dude but you didn’t make me spill my guts, any more than I made you spill yours. But I do got one request.”

“Sure.” Castiel’s throat was scratchy, his eyes burned, but at least he’d tamped back his tears, at least he wasn’t making a fool of himself or a mockery of Dean’s more legitimate grief. “Anything.”

“Tell Jimmy.”

“But what if—”

“Worst case scenario, he don’t feel the same way, but he’s still your brother and I guarantee he loves you,” said Dean firmly. “If he didn’t he’d never have gone splits on a house with you. Grown men don’t do that shit unless they care. Trust me, I know. No matter what you say, no matter how you fight, you’re still brothers and that ain’t never gonna change. And best case, Cas? Sounds like it’s never even fuckin’ occurred to you. What if he feels the same way?”

“He never would, he—”

“Sam did,” Dean interrupted. “Not long before…we had one hell of a rough winter, both damn near died, and I realized – I’d haunt his ass for fricken eternity if I went without tellin’ him. I knew I was bein’ a selfish douche – he’d hafta live knowing I felt that way, probably be totally grossed out, because, like, who wouldn’t be? I wasn’t grossed out, but obviously that was my major malfunction, not his. So I just…fuckin’ said it. Blamed the hypothermia goin’ to my head. And, uh, turned out he felt the same.” Dean glanced up at Castiel, raked a hand through his hair, looked away again, and muttered, “Winter got way warmer after that.” Castiel laughed, and Dean stared at him sharply and broke into a lovely smile. “Don’t regret openin’ my big mouth. Only regret that I didn’t do so years earlier. Turned out, he’d been thinkin’ all the same shit ‘bout me that I’d been thinkin’ ‘bout him.”

“I’m glad things worked out,” Castiel said, still smiling. “That doesn’t mean that things will for me, though.”

“True, that, but ya know what, Cas?”

“What?”

“The only way to find out is to risk yourself – the only way to find out is to try.”

Chapter End Notes

New plants mentioned in this chapter:

Birch: new beginnings, regeneration, hope.

Duckweed: no known symbolism. Castiel uses duckweed in his art, but duckweed is actually an invasive in the United States.
Elm: associated with "mother earth," femininity, and strength.

Forget-me-not: true love, faithfulness, memory.

Hemlock: longevity, majesty.

Holly: heavily associated with Christmas. Suggestive of Christ's crown of thorns, the berries are evocative of the blood of Christ and God's love for humanity.

Lily: coquetry, flirting, desire, passion, aspirations.

Maple: balance, love, longevity, money. There are many native varieties of maple tree.

Oak: wisdom, balance, nobility, endurance in the face of adversity. Oak trees drop acorns.

Pine: birth, abundance, love, fortune, health.

Sweetgum Tree: no known symbolism.

Water Lily: grief, separation, rebirth, optimism.
Chapter Notes

The children's book in this chapter is inspired by one of my son's favorite books, Day Dreamers.

Step outside and you will find

A world without compare.

It's not hidden or undefined -

Like the sky, it's always there!

Castiel paused, frowning. "'Find' and 'defined' are very…close…rhymes," he critiqued, "and 'undefined' lacks a certain…childish whimsy."

"I know," Jimmy sighed. "But I can’t come up with anything better. You got any ideas, Cassie?"

Raising an eyebrow, Castiel scowled, and Jimmy rolled his eyes. "Uh oh, time for the Castiel trademark ‘I’m not a writer, you’re a writer’ spiel."

"Jimmy—"

"Save it!" said Jimmy, laying a finger over Castiel’s lips. "I’ve heard this song-and-dance a zillion times, and I’m not fooled any more. I get it – I was there – Naomi told you that art was a waste of time and you should focus on writing, and then Zachariah trashed everything you ever wrote while praising my crap to the high heavens. I’m glad you kept making art despite their criticism. What I don’t get is why you took their bull about your writing to heart."

"But—"

"Cas – Cas, look at me," Jimmy commanded.

Heaving a tired sigh, Castiel did. It had been nearly two weeks since Dean had made Castiel swear to tell Jimmy about his feelings, and not only had Castiel failed to follow through, he’d grown increasingly uncomfortable in his brother’s presence. Hesitantly, he flicked his gaze to Jimmy’s gorgeous eyes; there was a tightness to them, a distance, an almost blank lack of recognition.

They’d always been brothers, but more than that, their whole lives they’d been best friends, but something had broken that – had been since the barbeque, how close Castiel had gotten to admitting the disgusting truth – and try as he might, Castiel couldn’t figure out where he’d gone wrong or how to fix it.

Meeting Jimmy’s gaze hurt.

“What happened when you started illustrating my poems?” prompted Jimmy.

“Mother and father flipped out at both of us.”

What did I say when I bought you that sketch pad, Castiel? That it was to be used to spread God’s
words and nothing else! And what did I say when I caught you drawing the heathen icons of the local people? Never again, Castiel! And James, I know you’ve been wasting your allowance frivolously, keeping him supplied, and remember: idle hands are the devil’s play things, and there are none idler than those that sketch and write impious, irreverent nonsense! Castiel, you will devote yourself doubly – no, triply! – hard to your studies and to the mission. Remember the cause, adhere to it, or face the consequences!

The pain was too great. Castiel lowered his gaze, and imagined a troubled sound dying in Jimmy’s throat. There was no way that faint whimper was real; chancing a look at Jimmy, Castiel confirmed that, much like the child in the story Jimmy had composed, Castiel’s fancy had gotten the better of him. Jimmy looked as he always looked: beautiful and carefree.

…except for that something making crow’s feet spread from the corners of Jimmy’s eyes. God, when had those gotten there, and when had Castiel stopped noticing the little changes to his brother’s features?

Probably when I forbade myself from staring at him, denied myself permission to memorize every perfect line, the placement of every strand of hair.

Instead, he looked back to the words typed on the print-out Jimmy had handed him, staring at the rhyme until the letters blurred into a grayish blob.

“How about this,” he said slowly, thoughtfully.

“Step outside and you will see
A world without compare.
It’s not hidden, no siree -
Like the sky, it’s always there!”

“Well, it’s got whimsy,” Jimmy conceded, picking up his red pen and scratching in the changes. “It still doesn’t seem quite…” Trailing off, he chewed his pen cap absently. “The natural world is lovely; and like the sky, it’s everywhere!” He shot Castiel a hopeful look. Quailing, speechless, Castiel nodded his agreement. Jimmy made the change and read the next stanza aloud while Castiel pulled out his second image. The first page’s art was simple – a realistic watercolor of their backyard – but the second began to show the transformation to Castiel’s vision of a world of fairies, with each subsequent image revealing more of the secrets of the garden.

“What’s that? What’s that?
A dragonfly?
A passing cat?
A butterfly?
But no – let your imagination soar!
A pixie spins,
Imps run the shore,
And those aren’t wings – their selkie skins!”
“You used the wrong ‘they’re,'” Castiel pointed out. Jimmy blinked and laughed ruefully.

“Shit, you’re right.” The pen scritch-scritched over the paper as Jimmy made the change. “I’ve been staring at this so long I didn’t even fricken notice. But other than that…?”

“Other than that, I maintain, as I have since your first draft, that this is my favorite pair of pages in the book.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” Jimmy assured Castiel with painful sincerity, brushing a finger over the back of Castiel’s hand where he yet held out the accompanying painting for Jimmy’s inspection. With a hiss, Castiel jerked his hand away; Jimmy’s touch had always burned hot and cold through him, and the symptoms were only growing worse.

*Maybe…maybe I should leave.*

“Sorry,” Jimmy muttered uncertainly. “Didn’t mean to—”

“Do you think I should make it clearer that this is the same flower as on the facing page?” Castiel interrupted. Jimmy was *apologizing* to him. He had to get a hold of himself. His erratic behavior was hurting Jimmy and it wasn’t fair.

“No, I think it’s clear the way it is,” said Jimmy with a sigh. “May I…?” Jimmy carefully curled his lovely, long fingers, smudged with dots of red ink, along the edge of the paper; Castiel let him take it, watched as Jimmy held it close to his face and squinted at it.

“Starting to go near sighted on me, brother?” Castiel managed a gentle smile.

Jimmy snorted. “If I am, you will too soon enough. When you’re my age…in an hour…” He shot Castiel a side-eyed, happy look, and for a split second it seemed like everything between them was normal, then Jimmy’s gaze fell away, and Castiel remembered himself, and reality was even harder to live with.

“Cassie…”

“It’s the pond, isn’t it?” said Castiel. If he was sure of one thing, it was that whatever Jimmy had to say in that forlorn tone of voice had absolutely nothing to do with Castiel’s artwork. If he was sure of two things, the second was that he had absolutely no desire to hear what Jimmy was actually going to say. There was a desperate edge to Castiel’s voice as he continued, “Or maybe the willow leaves? I wanted to keep the art true to life but when I tried to paint the water as it appears it was so murky and I thought, why not make it blue? And I know the willow leaves are more olive than green but—”

“Have you shown Dean the book yet?” Jimmy interrupted. Castiel snapped his mouth shut, grimacing, the question like a slap to the face. “He seems to appreciate your artwork.” There was an innuendo to Jimmy’s words that Castiel couldn’t fathom. “You know, if you and Dean are…together… I don’t mind, right? This isn’t some bullshit homophobia baggage our parents dumped on you, right? ‘Cause I never saw you as the type to buy in to all that but after what you said last time…”

“You didn’t believe me,” Castiel said flatly. Jimmy quirked his head in a silent question. “When I said Dean and I weren’t in a relationship, what, you think I lied?”

“You spend an awful lot of time with him,” Jimmy countered. “But that’s the thing, right? Honestly, Cas, with the way you’ve been acting the last few months – heck, since we moved here, even before that, since our parents died – I’m not sure what to believe. You talk about him
constantly, you’re always out, yet you refuse to introduce him to me—”

“I told you, he doesn’t want to come in the house, and I think that’s weird but it’s not up to me!”

—and you freaked out over a tree and now when I…” Jimmy exhaled, exasperated, and ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it. “You shook my hand off, Cassie. You’ve never…you don’t talk to me anymore. Not about anything real. I know you were nervous about living together…is that the problem?” There was an unfamiliar note in Jimmy’s usually lighthearted voice…desperation? Tension? Fear? Castiel’s confusion deepened. “You know that if this arrangement isn’t working for you, you can tell me right?”

Tell him the truth, Dean’s voice suggested.

No. Never. I can’t.

“That’s not…” Castiel shook his head. “I thought you were unhappy, Jimmy. We’re so isolated up here, and that’s always been my preference, but you’re social – outgoing – extroverted. Like with the barbeque, I figured that was your way of…coping?”

“Something like that,” muttered Jimmy. Surging to his feet so quickly that Castiel fell back in his chair in surprise, Jimmy turned away, walked across the room that served as Castiel’s study and stared out the window. Many of the trees surrounding their property were winter bare, and from the second floor they could see their nearest neighbor – a local business owner named Merchant and his family shared the double-width modular house. The children were playing in the yard, their delight obvious at the distance but disturbingly silent, a reproduction of happiness seen from afar and totally alien to anything that Castiel had ever experienced.

Jimmy mumbled something.

“What?” asked Castiel.

Be real, you don’t actually want to know what he said. You know what it’ll be. This is the end. Good job, Castiel, you’ve finally broken the only thing you ever really wanted, and—

“I know you’re in love with Dean!” Jimmy rounded on Castiel, shouting. His cheeks were flushed, blue eyes swimming in tears, and Castiel’s jaw dropped. “Why won’t you just tell me? What’re you so afraid of? Goddamn it, Cassie, I deserve better than this from you!”

“What?” Castiel repeated weakly.

“I always knew you weren’t one for a wide social circle, and I always knew…I knew you’d find someone.” Words poured from Jimmy so quickly that Castiel could scarce understand him; he was a ball of nervous energy, stepping forward, back, jittery and tense, eyes darting in all directions but never meeting Castiel’s, hand continually raking his hair, other hand gesticulating wildly, meaninglessly.

“How much I might want it to be the two of us it’s actually kinda freaked me out that you’ve never dated, ‘cause you deserve better than that, Cassie.” You deserve better than me, Jimmy.

“And…and…when we moved out here I only figured it would get worse. Not gonna lie, this Dean guy has me kinda…sorta…no, like, really freaked out because I’ve seen him but I’ve never talked to him and from what you say he’s a great guy but how do I know and you’re not very experienced in these things and I wish you’d at least bring him to the house because you know I’m bi, Cassie, and it’s fine with me if you’re bi or pan or gay or whatever – if you’re dating a guy, I don’t mind – but I swear to, like, Old Testament full-of-vengeance God that if he hurts you I am borrowing the
Benders wood chipper and…and…and…”

As if Jimmy’s babbling had taken all the wind from his sails, Jimmy turned away again and dropped his head against the wall beside the window with a thud.

“Does he make you happy, Cas?” A pleading catch in Jimmy’s voice forced a tear from Castiel’s eye. “Please…that’s…that’s…that’s all I really need to know. That’d be enough.”

“That’s my line,” whispered Castiel. Twisting, Jimmy blinked at him through bloodshot, tear-filled eyes. “You don’t get to say that to me, Jimmy. You’re the one who’ll find someone else. You’re the one who’ll move on. You’re going to find happiness, and I’m going to be…what…what are you even talking about? I’m in love with Dean? Do you have any idea what Dean and I talk about?”

“No,” said Jimmy, deflated, defeated. “Because you don’t tell me. You don’t tell me anything anymore.”

Castiel hands shook and he rose. His instincts clamored for him to approach his brother, lay hands on him gently, comfort him, reassure him, make sure Jimmy knew that, whenever Jimmy left, Castiel wouldn’t mind, but he made himself keep still despite the trembling in his limbs.

“Mostly, we talk about nature, and trees, and flowers. We hike. We explore. And sometimes…” Castiel took a deep breath and squeezed his eyes shut. He’d promised Dean he’d tell Jimmy the truth, and Castiel had never once broken his word. “Sometimes, Dean tells me about his brother. Sam died – the memorial on the willow stump in the backyard is to him – and Dean…Dean misses him. Because they were brothers. And…” His heart thumped so loudly that his blood rushed in his ears and he could scarce hear himself speaking. Maybe, if he pretended he wasn’t actually talking, pretended that Jimmy wasn’t actually there, he could make the words come. “They were more than brothers. Dean understands. No one else ever would, ever could, but he does.”

“Cassie…” Jimmy turned slowly from the wall, yet leaning against it with one arm raised for support, his expression wide-eyed, cheeks streaked with tears, mouth barely ajar. His lips were so plush, so pink, and Castiel felt a rush of dizzy euphoria thinking of how many times he’d longed to feel those lips on his.

He never, ever would.

But he couldn’t stop, not now that he’d said as much as he had.

“We talk about you, Jimmy.” Tearing his eyes from Jimmy’s face, Castiel directed the words at the polished wood floor. “Because my situation with you…is pretty similar to…to how Dean’s was…with his brother…you and I…we’re not more than brothers but I…but I…” Castiel swallowed and whispered, “but I want to be.”

The floor boards creaked. Castiel was reminded powerfully of when, during the barbeque, Jimmy had left Castiel alone on the porch. His back tensed, tensed further, as he waited to hear the distinctive whine of the boards in the hallway, speaking to Jimmy brushing him off, brushing by him, escaping his disgust of Castiel’s presence.

Arms wrapped around Castiel’s back, strong arms rested flush against Castiel’s chest, something soft and chapped – lips, oh God, I think those are lips – brushed over his neck, and Jimmy’s face, cheeks wet, pressed against the side of Castiel’s head.

Don’t hope.

Tears filled Castiel’s eyes, pooled around his closed lids, but his shaking quelled as he came up
against Jimmy’s solidity and strength.

Don’t hope.

“How are we both this fricken stupid?” Jimmy said, lips smearing the words blurry against Castiel’s skin.

Don’t hope.

“How did all those woodies I got when we were teenagers not clue you in?”

Don’t hope.

“You always used to…” Castiel mumbled. “I thought…I thought I disgusted you.” Every instinct screamed for him to hug Jimmy in return but…

Don’t hope.

“For fuck’s sake, Cassie, who did you think I was fantasizing about?”

Don’t hope.

“Beautiful, buxom women?” asked Castiel.

Don’t hope.

“You. I was always imagining you.”

Don’t…

An agonized noise choked in Castiel’s throat and his knees gave out. Had he always been this fragile?

No. Because he’d never, ever, ever, not once, let himself hope.

Jimmy caught his weight easily, effortlessly, muttering a stream of reassurance in Castiel’s ear. “It’s okay, I’m not angry, I’m just…I’m in shock. We talked about everything, we always talked about everything, except the most important thing, and we lost so much time…you always were the brave one, Cassie, whereas I’ve always, always, always been a coward, doing what mom and dad said, sneaking you art supplies while lying to them…you…” Jimmy kept on, but Castiel couldn’t make himself listen, couldn’t make himself feel more than he already did. He’d already felt more in the months they’d lived in the farmhouse than he’d felt in his entire life before. Castiel felt weak, his eyes burned with tears, and he whimpered and trembled and willed his arms to lift, to embrace his brother in return, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t move. Jimmy’s words resolved into clarity once more.

“I love you, Cassie – I love you, I love you, I love you…”

Castiel had misunderstood the situation completely.

He was dead.

This was heaven.

No. I’d go to hell for loving my brother.
He was dead.

This was hell.

He should be upset about that, but he wasn’t.

If this is what awaits me in hell…

With a gasp, the spell broke and Castiel gasped in a ragged, deep breath, choking on saliva, horrified at the distance that his inhale forced between him and his brother. He raised his arms, curled them around Jimmy, and held on for dear life, shaking and pressing ragged sobs into Jimmy’s neck.

“I love you.” The words slurred and twisted and broke, but Jimmy must have understood because he shuddered, spasmed his hug tighter, and his chest heaved around an agonized noise.

“…I know, God, I know, we’re both idiots but you said something and that’s amazing. I’m so proud of you, so jealous of you, so much less jealous than I was when I thought…but it doesn’t matter. You’re so strong, Cassie, and now I know, now we both know, and you never have to be alone again. I love you…I love you…I…”

They didn’t finish editing the story that day.

They didn’t stop touching each other, even when they picked themselves up off the study floor and tissued off each other’s faces; even when they went downstairs to make lunch; even when they cleaned the living room; and especially not when they curled up on the swing on their front porch, bodies intertwined for warmth. The longest time they separated was to use the bathroom. And that night, they stood on the second floor landing, each looking forlornly toward their own bedroom, and then by unspoken agreement turned together down the hall, footsteps loud on the wood, and got into Jimmy’s bed fully clothed. They didn’t cuddle close, didn’t kiss; they’d spent too many years pushing away from each other for those things to be easy, no matter how much they each wanted more.

They didn’t discuss their reservations, their inhibitions, their fears, their desires.

What else was there to say?

Jimmy’s fingers threaded between Castiel’s, their bodies mirrored as they huddled on their respective sides, and Castiel felt a peace he’d never known before.

He was broken and damned, but he wasn’t alone. He’d hoped for better for Jimmy, but their conversation had made it clear: Jimmy had been broken and damned as long as Castiel had been.

They could finally, finally be broken and damned together.

This might be hell.

God, if it is, let me never wake up.

“Cassie…” Jimmy’s voice was heavy and hot in Castiel’s ear. “You awake?”

“No,” Castiel whispered, shaking his head, smooshing his cheek into the pillow. “I’m definitely dreaming.”
That was the only explanation for Jimmy’s voice close to him, Jimmy’s body snuggled alongside his, Jimmy’s palm sweaty against his fingers.

Jimmy laughed.

Castiel opened his eyes.

“But if this is a dream…” …if this is hell… “…I hope I never wake up…” …of course I’d wake up to the same dream, the same promise of it becoming a nightmare ever on the horizon. His memories of the previous day were misty and diaphanous, but Jimmy was solid, gorgeous, shooting him a toothy smile.

What if this is real?

Edging forward, Jimmy closed the distance between them, telegraphing every movement, eyes wide as he watched Castiel’s reactions.

Jimmy’s hand came to rest on Castiel’s waist.

Jimmy’s leg threaded between Castiel’s knees.

Jimmy’s forehead pressed against Castiel’s.

Jimmy’s eyes came so close to Castiel’s face that Castiel’s vision of his brother distorted.

Jimmy’s chest met Castiel’s with every breath.

Jimmy’s erection brushed against Castiel’s thigh.

Neither moved.

“Cassie, may I kiss you?”

Both moved.

“God, yes.”

Their lips met.

Castiel had never kissed anyone before.

Castiel had never kissed anyone.

Society and media had given Castiel certain expectations, and logic had told Castiel that reality couldn’t possibly be as good as social mythology suggested.

Castiel was right.

Jimmy’s lips were chapped and rough, though they’d always looked soft to Castiel. The merest brush that Jimmy chanced over Castiel’s mouth snagging skin on skin. Castiel scarce knew what he was supposed to do; he felt like a useless lump, letting Jimmy take the lead, letting Jimmy ask consent, letting Jimmy press their bodies together while Castiel lay unmoving and uncertain.

Sensation – hard to identify as anything but light, tingly warmth – spread through Castiel’s lips, through his face, trailed streamers through his blood. Castiel had woken up hard, as, apparently, had Jimmy, and his cock twitched, pressed into Jimmy’s belly, and a burst of bliss flared so hot that Castiel gasped and nearly didn’t hear Jimmy moan.
“You…you didn’t kiss me back…?” whispered Jimmy. His breath brushed soft over Castiel’s face, inexplicably fresh even first thing in the morning.

*How is he always perfect?*

Shame dulled Castiel’s pleasure. His breath surely stunk. His hands lay awkwardly on the bed beside him. He had no idea what he was supposed to do. No one had ever appealed to him save Jimmy…

…and Dean…

…and he finally had his impossible, inconceivable shot and he blew it on the very first kiss.

“You’re freaking out,” said Jimmy with a sigh, rolling away. The sudden lack of heat alongside Castiel’s chest was debilitating, and he whimpered. “I didn’t mean to push…fuck…what’m I supposed to do, Cas? If you don’t want something, you gotta tell me. That’s the whole damn point of asking consent. It’s not worth a damn if you lie to me.” Castiel shivered, curling inadvertently toward Jimmy, unsure if he was allowed to reach out, allowed to bridge the gap, allowed to touch his brother.

Wait.

There was an easy solution to this problem.

They were talking now – communicating now. Castiel was allowed to talk about what he wanted. God, this was going to take some getting used to.

“Don’t go,” Castiel croaked. He licked his lips, swallowed, and tried again. “Please, Jimmy…that was, um…” He flushed, and admitted in a rush, “That was my first kiss but I didn’t lie, I want you to kiss me, I just…just…” Jimmy turned back to face him, expression comically shocked. “What?”

“You…you’ve never kissed anyone?” said Jimmy incredulously. “Jesus, Cassie, how’d you survive puberty?”

“Same way you did - by fantasizing about you.”

*Crap,* he’d said that out loud.

With a snarl, Jimmy launched himself across the space separating them, tackled Castiel, pressed him into the mattress, kissed him desperately. Stunned, Castiel lay and let him, assaulted by heat, made helpless by the wonderful feel of Jimmy’s weight over him, around him, straddling him. Jimmy’s cock made a tent of his loose pants, while Castiel’s, trapped in the jeans he’d slept in, pressed against Jimmy’s ass.

Kissing felt nice.

Castiel thought he could grow to really enjoy it.

He still had no idea how he was supposed to respond.

Chuckling ruefully, Jimmy broke off the kiss and hunched over Castiel, resting his forehead on Castiel’s chest, his hands wrapped tight around Castiel’s shoulders.

“I have no idea what’s going on,” Castiel confessed.

“It shows,” Jimmy said. Castiel flinched. “No…no, that’s not a bad thing, I just feel like…” He sat
up and shook his head. His weight on Castiel’s dick was...extremely pleasant. “This has always been the problem. You’re on this…this…this pedestal that I can’t reach and never could. Sure, I was born first, but I’ve spent my whole life chasing your shadow. Even now…I’ve always wanted you, Cassie, and now I find out, what, you saved yourself for me? How can I match that? How can I compete with that? This cherry was popped a long time ago, there’s no getting the pit back in the skin…”

“I find that analogy…disturbing,” said Castiel. Lips twisting, Jimmy quirked a skeptical eyebrow at him. “Preserving my virginity wasn’t an intentional plan to make you feel uncomfortable or unworthy. I suppose if I’d met anyone who appealed to me as much as you do, I might have made different choices, but I never did, and I never wanted to.” Except…Except for Dean. You’re not wrong that I find him appealing…very appealing…but we’ve not done anything. He’s in love with his brother’s ghost, and I’m in love with you. Perhaps if I hadn’t been—”

Castiel gasped as Jimmy dragged his head up, dragged his lips over Castiel’s neck, dragged their stubbled cheeks together roughly. Jimmy’s hips ground down against Castiel’s crotch, pivoted to press Jimmy’s cock against Castiel’s navel. Anticipation pooled in Castiel’s belly – he wanted Jimmy to kiss him again, waited for it eagerly, couldn’t understand why Jimmy hadn’t done so yet. Hesitantly, he reached out, cupped Jimmy’s cheek, and pulled his brother’s face up. Their lips met, and Jimmy sighed. The urgency ebbed from his movements and he kissed Castiel gently. Nervous, Castiel tried to kiss back, pursed his lips, moved them in unfamiliar ways, mimicked Jimmy’s actions. Encouraging sounds hummed through Jimmy’s throat; he planted his hands on either side of Castiel’s head and shifted, bumped their noses, pressed their lips together hard enough that Castiel could feel every shift of Jimmy’s mouth muscles and could follow his lead.

“Good, good,” Jimmy murmured, scarce separating their mouths, and no sooner were the words out than their lips were sealed again.

Shifting his weight to lean heavily on one arm, Jimmy reached down blindly with his other hand, fumbled until he found Castiel’s grip, and pulled Castiel’s hand up to cup Jimmy’s side. Recognizing the invitation, the instructions on how he should behave, Castiel lifted his other hand to mirror where Jimmy had placed the first and rubbed gently along Jimmy’s sides. A pleased moan blew air from Jimmy’s lungs directly into Castiel’s nose – there’s a whiff of morning breath, he’s not perfect after all, thank God, how could I live up to that? – and, encouraged, Castiel translated everything he wanted done to his own body into actions on Jimmy’s, hitching Jimmy’s shirt up and tentatively running his fingers over Jimmy’s skin. Awe compounded Castiel’s pleasure and desire; Jimmy was firm yet soft, hard yet giving, muscled and smooth. Strands of hair made a thin trail down the center of his chest, thickened farther down, a perfect mirror of Castiel’s own hair. Jimmy broke off their kiss with another moan and pressed his forehead to Castiel’s, squeezing his eyes shut against tears.

“You’re touching me,” groaned Jimmy, sliding his hips down, pressing their crotches together. The weight of Jimmy’s cock against the bulge in Castiel’s pants, only the fabric of their clothes separating them, was too much and far too little sensation.

“Yes,” Castiel agreed, shocked at how coarse his voice had grown. “And while I don’t wish to stop, if you ask me to, I will.”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Jimmy growled, grinding their cocks together. Shocked, Castiel’s fingers tensed against the slight curve of Jimmy’s breasts, his hips straining off the bed in pursuit of more of the body-searing pleasure that accompanied Jimmy’s simple movement. Jimmy laughed, hot and slow, breath puffing damply on Castiel’s cheek. “Is this what you fantasized
about, Cassie?” Castiel nodded fervently, knocking their heads together. “Use your words, brother, I want to hear you…”

Nervous, Castiel forced his eyes open – when had he closed them? He couldn’t remember; whether they were open or shut all he could see was Jimmy. Jimmy’s were open too, pupils so black they nearly swallowed the blue that Castiel adored, rimmed with tears that Castiel felt a momentary, insane desire to lick away. Jimmy’s cheeks were pinked, his lips reddened and damp. Heartened, Castiel raked his fingers up Jimmy’s torso; Jimmy strained against his hands, arched back, ground their cocks together. His eyes slipped shut, his mouth fell open, and Castiel wished he could take a picture, wished he could hold onto this moment forever. The bliss slackening Jimmy’s face was an expression he never wanted to forget.

“I imagined the sounds you’d make…” Castiel said, rolling his hips up from the bed in the hopes of eliciting more moans; Jimmy didn’t disappoint, he whimpered and rutted against Castiel and crashed down against him, mashed their lips together sloppily. The heat beneath Castiel’s skin was becoming unbearable. His shirt clung to his chest, pants over-snug about his thighs and crotch. Despite the pressure, despite their proximity, Jimmy was scarce touching him, had hardly touched his bare skin, and the separation was terrible.

“I imagined how your skin would feel…like mine but… different…better…”

Curling one hand around Jimmy’s breast, tentatively rubbing at the tight nub of Jimmy’s nipple, Castiel slid his hand over Jimmy’s sweat-slickened skin and ran a nail down Jimmy’s spine.

_I can do this._

“Holy shit, Cassie,” Jimmy panted, rocking their bodies together, picking up a steady rhythm. Every time their hips ground close, Castiel’s vision of the room blanked, only a ghostly silhouette of his brother remaining to ground him.

_I am doing this._

“And I…I…”

_If I could do anything right now, I would…_

Shifting his arms to hold Jimmy tight against him, Castiel pivoted hard to the side, dragging Jimmy down to the bed. Jimmy squawked in surprise and rolled onto his back, and Castiel settled on his knees between Jimmy’s legs. One glance at his brother scattered Castiel’s intentions to the wind. Jimmy sprawled beneath him, legs splayed, arms limp, chest heaving, lips parted around desperate pants. The light cloth of Jimmy’s flannel pajama bottoms settled over ever contour of Jimmy’s cock, a wet spot darkening the fabric that clung to the blunt head, and Castiel stared as Jimmy twitched and the spot grew larger.

“Jimmy…” he whispered, awed. His gaze scanned over Jimmy’s belly, exposed where Castiel had tugged and shifted his shirt, skin patchily flushed red, black hairs feathering over his skin, scanned up to Jimmy’s face, and their eyes met.

Castiel’s hands shook as he took hold of the button on his jeans, popped it free, and lowered the zipper. Jimmy’s gaze left his, and Castiel watched the transformation as Jimmy avidly, breathlessly watched Castiel’s movements, eyes following every twitch of Castiel’s fingers.

_He wants this as much as I do._

“I imagined…”
No – he’s more experienced than I. He knows what he wants, knows how good this can feel. He probably wants this even more than I do.

“You couldn’t know…you couldn’t find out…so I’d find someplace to hide, someplace private, if I could…or if I couldn’t…” Castiel licked his lips and tugged his underwear out of the way, exposing his cock to his brother for the first time since they were small children. “Sometimes I’d do it…I’d…I’d…masturbate…while you were there with me, sharing the bed or in the same room…and I’d be so quiet…”

Dropping his head back, letting his eyes slip shut, Castiel wrapped his hand around himself, freed his erection, and stroked his cock in a loose grip. Even sightless, he felt Jimmy’s gaze on him as solidly as he felt Jimmy’s thighs nudging against his, as he felt Jimmy’s hands come to rest on his hips.

“I did that too,” whispered Jimmy. “I’d get off thinking about what’d happen if you woke up. Fuck, I was convinced you’d be disgusted but it still turned me on so much ’cause at least then you’d know, and…and…” Jimmy’s hand left Castiel’s hip and he whimpered, instantly missing the weight of it, the connection it represented. Firming his grip, he smeared pre-release over his palm and rubbed his cock more roughly. “…and what if you were into it?”

Jimmy’s hand wrapped around Castiel’s where it stroke his dick, his fingers threaded between Castiel’s, and he jerked hard on Castiel’s cock. Rapture engulfed Castiel, his teeth snapped together, his back arched, and with a hiss of shock he came. He hadn’t even been close, he didn’t think, and then…and then…

“You’re touching me,” he managed, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. “Jimmy, please…”

His hand fell away from his cock, leaving only Jimmy’s to stroke him through the peak of his pleasure. Castiel’s hips jerked into Jimmy’s palm, mimicked Jimmy’s movements, and he thought he’d fly to pieces, thought he’d lose himself, it felt so incredible. It was long moments before he returned to earth, opened his eyes to see Jimmy flushed and panting, hips working up against the bed, cock swaying and bouncing with every movement. The urge to touch him was overwhelming, and Castiel reached out unthinkingly. A wounded noise from Jimmy stilled Castiel’s hand, reminded him of the newness, the uncertainty, the awkwardness of their situation and their relationship.

“May I...” His voice was hoarse, his throat dry. Licking his lips, Castiel struggled to work moisture into his mouth, and tried again. “May I touch you, Jimmy?”

Castiel wasn’t afraid any more.

No.

Castiel was terrified but it didn’t matter because Jimmy had touched him and Jimmy needed him and Jimmy’s happiness was paramount.

Jimmy nodded fervently.

Leaning down, carefully arching his back so as not to put the slightest pressure on Jimmy’s erection, Castiel brushed a gentle kiss over Jimmy’s lips and drew away. Jimmy whimpered, leaned up from the bed in pursuit, but Castiel ignored him, instead placing a sequence of nips and pecks along Jimmy’s jaw line.

“Use your words,” taunted Castiel.
With a groan, Jimmy arched off the bed, knocking Castiel off him.

“Touch me, Cassie,” Jimmy begged. Turning to his side, Jimmy grabbed Castiel’s hand and dragged it to his crotch. “Touch me.” Not bothering to pull his pajamas aside, Jimmy thrust insensibly against Castiel hand, chasing stimulation through the fabric. “Touch me!” Amazed, Castiel stared at Jimmy’s beautiful expression: cheeks flushed, eyes squeezed shut, lips agape, a trail of spittle leaking from the corner of his mouth, mirroring the tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. “Touch me, touch me, touch me...” As Jimmy chanted, Castiel shook off Jimmy’s grip, slipped his hand between Jimmy’s over-heated skin and the loose waist band of his pants, and touched his brother’s dick for the first time. With a strangled cry, Jimmy stopped begging, groaning and thrusting desperately into Castiel’s hand. The way was slick, and Castiel realized belatedly that his come was easing the way, his come was coating Jimmy’s cock. Soon, Jimmy’s come would coat his hand too, the two would mix, and...affection and joy flared utterly non-sexual, utterly glorious pleasure through Castiel, curled his toes in his socks, flashed brilliant over his vision.

How are we twins? He’s loud where I’m soft, he’s social where I’m shy, he’s exuberant where I’m restrained. We’re identical yet he looks so different to my eyes, his cock feels so different in my hand, thick and heavy and hot and good, so good, so...

“You’re so good...” Castiel whispered, nerves suddenly flaring, but he forced himself to say the last word, the word in his heart. “...brother...”

Gasping urgently for breath, body arching to push his cock forward, arching toward Castiel, Jimmy strangled out a sound that might have been Castiel’s name and climaxed. Come splattered Castiel’s hand, soaked the flannel fabric, stain spreading, and Jimmy sighed contentment and eased back against the bed, yet rocking lazily against Castiel’s hand.

“Wow,” Castiel breathed.

“That was fabulous,” Jimmy said, hissing the last syllable out long and low. He giggled as if he’d told a joke. “When can we do it again?”

“Soon,” whispered Castiel with as much conviction as he’d ever felt about anything in his life. “Very, very soon.”

Fatigue rolled Castiel under and he slumped against the bed, lying on his side facing Jimmy. Lazily, Jimmy turned to face him, also on his side. For the first time since the previous day, Castiel felt and truly believed that this was real. Sweat made damp trails over Jimmy’s cheeks, matted his messy hair about his forehead and ears. His chest yet heaved, ruffling his shirt, as he smiled gently at Castiel. That smile...that was the key, Castiel though, reaching out uncertainly and running his thumb lightly over Jimmy’s lips. No fantasy of Jimmy reacted with such simple happiness.

“When I imagined this, I thought you’d humor me.” Castiel’s feelings demanded expression. After so many years of silence, he needed Jimmy to understand and he needed to understand Jimmy. Jimmy’s soft skin made a velvety layer between Castiel’s searching fingers and the perfect bone structure beneath. “The best scenario I could concoct, the only scenario where you didn’t condemn me, was...” He trailed off, grimacing, uncertain how to express himself, and used his thumb to wipe moisture from beneath Jimmy’s perfect eyes. Jimmy watched him, unmoving, flush fading, breath evening, gaze tracking every movement. Even when Castiel flicked alarming close to Jimmy’s eyeball, Jimmy didn’t flinch, scarce blinked.

How much he trusts me, wow...
...why couldn’t I bring myself to trust him all this time? How many years have we wasted...

We have a lot to make up for.

“I’d admit to you that I was a virgin and you’d take pity on me,” Castiel admitted, brushing dark, damp locks of hair from Jimmy’s forehead, tucking the longer strands behind Jimmy’s ear. A thin trail of come beaded off the back of his hand and dripped onto the pillow beneath Jimmy’s head.

“Cassie...”

Castiel brushed a silencing finger over Jimmy’s lips.

“I’d not have the nerve to tell you why – that I’d only ever loved one person, only ever loved you – but I’d finally have the nerve to ask you to help, to teach me, and you’d agree to show me, to ease my fears by educating me, show mocking sympathy for your bumbling younger brother.”

Tears pooled again in Castiel’s eyes, to his embarrassment. He ran his hand over the side of Jimmy’s face, down the muscular curve of Jimmy’s neck, and brushed the collar of Jimmy’s t-shirt aside. There was a bruise – a hickey – darkening the skin above the sharp bulge of Jimmy’s collarbone. Castiel had no memory of placing it there, but he must have. There was no one else, for either of them. Castiel understood that now.

...but what about...

...no. No one.

“You’d instruct me how to pleasure myself, teach me sensuality by telling me how you liked to be touched, how you liked to be pleasured, how you liked to pleasure others. If I was lucky, you’d reach climax as part of your demonstration and I’d get to hear the noises you made when you came. Every word would be etched in my soul, indelibly burned into my mind, cherished for the rest of my life, because they’d be all I’d ever have. Years later, in lonely moments, I could pull those memories out, grow hard again, touch myself again, remember what you’d said, imagine how you’d touch me, cling to the way your voice had sounded when you’d demonstrated on your own cock how I wish you’d touch mine.” Castiel pressed his thumb against the bruise and Jimmy hissed in pain, finally closing his eyes. “That was my most ambitious fantasy. That was my ‘ultimate.’ This...” He leaned forward, gathering up everything he’d learned about kissing in recent hours, and pressed his lips against Jimmy’s. “I never dared dream of this, even in the quiet solitude of my own mind.”

“And you say you’re not a poet,” scoffed Jimmy. Castiel shook his head and kissed Jimmy again.

“Honestly, I’m not sure why you even keep me around.”

A wry smile suggested that Jimmy was attempting to pass his words off as a joke but Castiel could hear the underlying truth and sadness.

“Jimmy...”

“No.” Jimmy shook his head. “You got your chance to serenade me, it’s my turn now. Cassie, you...I’m sorry I never said anything. Maybe I should have. In a lifetime of dreams it never crossed my mind that you’d reciprocate, so I pushed my feelings down, shoved them aside, tried to transfer them to others...I guess it doesn’t matter now. We’re here. You want to know how to ‘pleasure’ me, Cas?” Castiel nodded. “Be yourself.”

“But I—”
“But I’ve loved you since before I knew what those words meant and there is nothing you could say or do now that’ll change that,” Jimmy insisted.

“That doesn’t strike me as the basis for a healthy relationship,” objected Castiel.

“Like you’ve got so much experience with healthy relationships.” Jimmy rolled his eyes. Though he knew his brother kidded, Castiel flinched and averted his eyes, put distance between himself and Jimmy. “Sorry, that came out kinda harsh.”

“It’s true,” replied Castiel with resignation. “I have no experience with relationships, healthy or otherwise. I have no idea what I’m doing. I’ve never had a friend, much less a boyfriend, so what do I know about communication or devotion or ‘making it work?’”

“No – no, Cassie, don’t make excuses for my bad behavior.” Jimmy reached out and brushed his hand over Castiel’s cheek, but no pleasurable rush accompanied the movement. “I should have stayed worried, stayed frightened. This is hell after all.

“How’re we so shitty at this?” groaned Jimmy, rolling on to his back and clutching his head with both hands. “We’ve been talking to each other for thirty damn years.”

“We’ve been hiding and lying to each other for thirty years,” Castiel corrected. Jimmy sighed but didn’t disagree. “We’ve both got a lot to learn.”

“I want to, Cassie,” Jimmy promised, sincerity brightening his eyes as he turned back to Castiel. “I’m done hiding, and I promise every word I’m saying now is the truth. I want to learn everything about you. I want to learn to be the man you deserve.” Castiel shook his head and the excitement shining from Jimmy’s beaming grin faded. “Oh. That’s…that’s not what you want?”

“It is what I want,” said Castiel. “But would you please stop putting yourself down? What does it say about my affection for you, if you’re so worthless? What kind of man am I to love someone as shallow and undeserving as you think yourself? It’s a poor way of putting me on a pedestal, to insult yourself.”

“Back at ya,” said Jimmy, smiling wryly. “And you’ve said all kinds of awesome shit that makes it clear you don’t think I’m undeserving, and that’s, uh, awesome. Let’s do that. Next time one of us feels the need to put ourselves down as some bullshit excuse of elevating the other, let’s nip it in the bud by refuting that crap. So you – you can tell me how deserving I am and how what I see as shallow and undeserving as you think yourself? It’s a poor way of putting me on a pedestal, to insult yourself.”

“Back at ya,” said Jimmy, smiling wryly. “And you’ve said all kinds of awesome shit that makes it clear you don’t think I’m undeserving, and that’s, uh, awesome. Let’s do that. Next time one of us feels the need to put ourselves down as some bullshit excuse of elevating the other, let’s nip it in the bud by refuting that crap. So you – you can tell me how deserving I am and how what I see as my, like, inconstancy or some similar Regency Jane Austen BS, is actually a plus because you appreciate my experience, and I can point out things like…” He paused, lips twisting in a moue that Castiel desperately wanted to kiss away – I’m allowed to do that now, good God, that’s amazing – and then he broke into a dazzling, toothy grin and said, “I can point out that you have a friend, Cas, one you made all on your own, so stow your crap about not having any.”

“I do?” asked Castiel blankly.

Jimmy rolled his eyes again. “If I ever meet Dean, I’m gonna tell him you said that.”

Is Dean my friend?

“I hope you get the chance to do that,” Castiel replied.

Somehow, ‘friend’ feels like the wrong term. Just as I would never refer to Jimmy as a ‘friend,’
what I have with Dean feels...different than I expected friendship to feel based on what everyone has led me to believe. But Jimmy is my brother, and the love of my life, which demonstrates better than anything that I am fundamentally incapable of keeping people in the categories they belong in, since those two things should be mutually exclusive. Dean is...

...I suppose my feelings toward Dean are what fraternal affection should feel like. We’ve not known each other long but he’s so...so...

...so perfect?

...and sometimes I want to kiss him?

But now I have Jimmy. I do, I really do.

“Awesome,” said Jimmy. Reaching out, he cradled the back of Castiel’s head and pulled Castiel in for a kiss. “Enough communication. Let’s get back to, ya know, hard core sex.”

But I still kind of sort of really want to kiss Dean.

Congratulations, Castiel, you’ve had what you want for less than 24 hours and you’re already preparing ways to sabotage it.

Let it go.

Castiel’s eyes slipped shut and his thoughts drifted. After a lifetime of repression, it was depressingly easy to distract himself, to lose himself in the feeling of Jimmy’s lips moving gently against his. The brush of hard flesh against him, the tug of fingers tangled in his hair, the huff of each of Jimmy’s fervent breaths directly into Castiel’s lungs, the accompanying satisfaction of finally, finally touching his brother, was enough.

This was enough.

Jimmy’s lips parted and his tongue flicked out, licked over the seam of Castiel’s mouth, and he opened for his brother, tasted him, sighed happily as pleasure subsumed doubts and worries and the tension of miscommunication. Shimmying over the mattress, Jimmy brought their bodies together, clasped Castiel’s hand where both their arms were trapped between them, hoisted a leg to capture Castiel’s hips and grind their soft cocks together.

“I’ve got so much to teach you, brother,” Jimmy whispered. “You ready for your lessons with the professor?”

Shocking pleasure ripped through Castiel; suddenly desperate with need, he seized his brother, crashed their mouths back together hard, kissed Jimmy sloppily, fervently, urgently.

“Can already tell you’re gonna be such a good student for me,” continued Jimmy. “Such a fast learner...so eager...but there will be a test after, and if you don’t pass, I might have to punish you...”

“I’m ready,” Castiel breathed. “I’m ready.” His cock twitched with interest and he rutted against Jimmy’s thigh, building bliss, building a rhythm. “I’m ready.” Jimmy’s lips against his weren’t enough, Castiel needed more, needed to explore and taste, and he pressed his tongue against Jimmy’s, pushed into Jimmy’s mouth, and Jimmy groaned. “I’m ready.” Jimmy’s trapped hand wiggled beneath Castiel’s body, won free to the other side, wrapped around and squeezed Castiel’s butt cheeks.
“I’m ready!” gasped Castiel.

“Alright, we’re going to start with a demonstration.” Jimmy’s mouth slid from Castiel’s; he ignored Castiel’s distressed whimper and continued down, down, sucking a line of kisses onto Castiel’s neck. Positioned as they were, removing Castiel’s shirt was impossible, but Jimmy tugged it up and out of the way, bunched it about Castiel’s chest, pulled it hard enough that the fabric dug painfully into Castiel’s armpits. He was about to protest when Jimmy wrapped his mouth around Castiel’s nipple and words vaporized into a shocked groan.

No…no, I have to be quiet…

…wait…no…I don’t, I really don’t, there’s no one to hear…it’s safe, this is safe, how incredible is that?

Chuckling, Jimmy drew away only enough that his breath ghosted hot over sensitive flesh and left Castiel desperate and needy.

“Remember to pay attention to exactly what I do…you’ve been an apt student so far, but don’t you dare get too distracted…” Jimmy wrapped two fingers around Castiel’s other nipple and twisted. Squeezing his eyes shut, fighting back tears prompted by the unexpected swirl of pain and pleasure, Castiel arched into Jimmy’s hands, into Jimmy’s mouth, and felt. Unthinking, one of his hands fumbled and groped until he found the back of Jimmy’s head, silently imploring his brother to continue. He’d never imagined something so simple would feel so good, had never touched his nipples save the occasional accidental brush while dressing or showering. Groping one’s chest during sex was something women did; men’s nipples weren’t sensitive.

Castiel had to give up the idea that he had a clue how sex worked.

Castiel’s body was seared. Every pump of blood carried a renewed surge of heat to his extremities, throbbed through his hardening cock. The trickles of pain that had accompanied Jimmy’s first tugs and nips subsided as pleasure mounted; Jimmy licked and sucked, teethed and teased at the achingly tight nub of Castiel’s one nipple, rubbed at the other, until Castiel thought he couldn’t take any more.

“Please…”

With a smacking sound, Jimmy freed the nipple he’d thorough abused, thoroughly delighted, and chill air hit saliva. Even that brought pleasure, an icy dagger of it that plunged through Castiel and somehow drove him higher instead of grounding him.

“Please,” he whispered.

His fingers strained against Jimmy’s scalp; he had no idea what he hoped to accomplish but Jimmy would have none of it, resisting, unmoving. Jimmy freed his hand from where it was wedged beneath Castiel, cupped Castiel’s dampened breast, and turned his attention to Castiel’s other nipple.

“Oh God, please!” Castiel begged.

One hand tortured Castiel’s nipple, the other curled strong and grounding around Castiel’s waist, and Jimmy hummed and laughed wickedly. The sound vibrated through Castiel’s chest, through his body, as hot as another touch.

“Please, Jimmy, please…”
Castiel wasn’t sure what he was begging for. He needed, he needed everything, wanted more than it would ever be reasonable to ask.

“…please, please, please…”

A gentle shove tipped Castiel onto his back; his legs fell limply to the sides. His cock bulged obscenely up. Jimmy looked up through his eyelashes, smirked, licked a line down Castiel’s abs and navel and stopped to tongue at Castiel’s belly button. The sensation was so strange – not pleasurable, just weird, like being tickled – that Castiel’s next please broke up around breathy giggles.

“Good, good,” murmured Jimmy, though Castiel hadn’t a clue what Jimmy was approving of. “Remember, brother…” Castiel gasped and mouthed another plea. “…I expect you to observe and emulate this very important lesson.”

“Jimmy – what – please—”

Jimmy’s lips closed around the head of Castiel’s cock.

Castiel’s sense of anything save utter bliss was obliterated.

If there was a test, he was going to fail.

Clearly, Jimmy would have to demonstrate again.

Castiel should have been ashamed of the wanton, desperate noises he made, embarrassed by the awkward way his hips jerked, jerked, jerked up from the bed to rub his cock against Jimmy’s lips, but he wasn’t. Sobbing, out of control, all Castiel could do was feel. The heat and moisture of Jimmy’s mouth was beyond anything Castiel had fantasized about; comparing Jimmy sucking and licking against him to Castiel’s meager experience masturbating was like comparing the first day of summer to the first day of winter. Castiel hadn’t realized how gray and drab his world had been, painted in snowy whites and barren browns and pallid blues, until Jimmy touched him and made the world a rainbow, neon and over-saturated. Castiel’s fingers scrambled at the blankets, fumbled for something solid to grasp, as waves of sensation tumbled his senses over and over. Jimmy’s ministrations were perfect, enthralling, all-encompassing. The moment might have been over in the wink of an eye, might have lasted a lifetime.

Choking on Jimmy’s name, Castiel came, tears filming his eyes.

Blinking through his distraction, Castiel looked down. Jimmy grinned up toward him, an innocent expression Castiel had seen a thousand thousand times made lewd by the line of come clinging to his eyebrows, framing his eye, coating his cheek, dripping down his chin.

“Ready to show me what you’ve learned?”

Panic blanked Castiel’s pleasure.

A cock in my mouth? My lips on Jimmy’s dick? His come dripping down my face? No! I can’t, I can’t, I—I—

“—can’t, I’m sorry Jimmy, I don’t think I…I know I…can’t, I really can’t, I—I—”

“Shh,” Jimmy interrupted, gentle tone belying the alarmed widening of his eyes. “Cassie, what—hey, hey, you’re okay – it’s okay.” Launching himself up the bed, Jimmy gathered Castiel in his arms, ran soothing hands down his sides. More terrified than he could justify, mind awash with
images of debasing himself by pleasuring his brother – no, that’s not how it would be, that wasn’t how it was when Jimmy did it for me, I know that, it’d be alright, but nonetheless I can’t, I can’t, there’s no way – Castiel clung to Jimmy and shook.

“—I can’t, I can’t, I—”

“It’s alright, Cassie,” promised Jimmy. “You don’t have to be ready. You never have to be ready, okay?”

“—can’t—”

“I love you anyway,” Jimmy said. The words pierced Castiel’s terror and he snapped his mouth shut, hard, as it dawned on him, to his further shame, that he was babbling. “Nothing you’re not comfortable with, okay?”

Castiel nodded, smudging tears over Jimmy’s come-streaked face.

God, I’m pathetic. What he gave to me freely, I’m denying him because of petty, juvenile fear. Every time I dare to think for a moment that I’m not broken, I find some new layer of dysfunction I never imagined.

“Can you say the words, Cas?”

“Is it…is it really okay?” Castiel hiccupped. He knew the answer. No matter what Jimmy said, it wasn’t okay that Jimmy offered pleasures that Castiel refused to reciprocate.

“It’s really okay,” Jimmy confirmed – Jimmy lied.

No, he wouldn’t lie to me.

“You believe me, right? Because I mean it – I really mean it.”


“I love you too, brother. So much. So much. Just breathe, you’re alright. I’ll never hurt you. I’ll never ask more than you’re willing to give. So please…please don’t be afraid. I’d do anything for you, Cas.”

He has me up on a pedestal again.

If I tell him not to do that, he’ll get upset at me, expect me to reciprocate, because equals don’t freak out over blow jobs. That pedestal is all that’s protecting me from his justified anger.

If I stay up on the pedestal, he’ll always treat me as fragile, as special, as angelic and inhuman.

If I come off the pedestal, he’ll be disgusted by what a disaster I am.

There’s no way out of this.

I’m trapped.

I was right. This is hell.

“I love you, Jimmy – you know that, right? You know I’ll always…I’ve always…”

Soothing noises and unearned, gentle caresses were Jimmy’s only answer.
I’ll say nothing.

It’s the only way forward.

Repressing his confusion and fear and sadness, Castiel allowed himself to be soothed.

Jimmy wanted him to be calm and happy.

Nothing was more important than making Jimmy happy.

And since I can’t make him happy physically, sexually, by giving him the pleasure he deserves…

If he wants me on a pedestal, then I’ll be on a pedestal for him.

I’ll be whatever he wants me to be.
A cold snap brought an early October frost and “unfortunately” kept Castiel and Jimmy confined to the house. A lifetime of practice repressing everything he wanted made it depressingly easy for Castiel to repress his doubts and focus on enjoying what he and Jimmy had for as long as they could have it. Ice crystals rimed their windows every morning, cold seeped in through chinks around the windows and the gap under the door that had gone unnoticed in milder weather, and in between hours spent editing and creating art, and many more hours spent in each other’s embrace, they wrote up a list of what they’d need to winterize the house. A down comforter was on the shopping list, as was weather stripping, window sealant, and a guard that happened to be shaped like a whale meant to block the bottom of the door. There were so many things they needed to get through the winter, not least of all each other.

The book was nearly finished – it had a title now, *Spirits and Garden Sprites* – and their agent swore up and down that the check for their advance would be cut any day. In another week or two they could go to town, visit the nearest department store and get everything they need, stop by Home Depot and buy enough pellet fuel to last the season, but for now they huddled close at night and shivered.

Gazing out the window toward the backyard, every remaining leaf and petal edged in white, Castiel worried about Dean. The plants were dying, the grass carpeted in leaves that Castiel was dreading having to rake, and even the honeysuckle that had somehow bloomed through the summer was shriveled, dried, and brown. The willow looked diseased, though research told Castiel that it was healthy and normal, with half its leaves yellowed and half rotting on the ground beneath it or floating on the ripples of the pond. The growth that had been so lustrous that the branches had formed a curtain was now sparse, the leafless tendrils skeletal as they swayed like tattered, shredded fabric in even the slightest breeze.

Castiel hadn’t seen Dean since their last hike together, since he’d made Castiel promise to talk to Jimmy. Castiel missed him, profoundly, far more than he’d expected to. Initially, Castiel merely longed to tell his friend the news: that Castiel and Jimmy had spoken; that they’d reached an understanding; and that Castiel was happier than he’d ever been, even though he worried about their communication issues. He wanted someone he could tell his fears, someone with whom he could share his suspicion that when his and Jimmy’s honeymoon period ended the relationship would wither and die, same as the garden did faced with ice.

As days stretched into weeks, Castiel’s anticipation of sharing his happiness with Dean transitioned into concern.

Dean didn’t come around.

*Why* didn’t Dean come around?

Castiel hadn’t been a good enough friend to bother asking for Dean’s address, his phone number, or his last name. He had no idea where Dean came from, no idea where he went, and no guesses where Dean might be when they weren’t together. Castiel had no ability to track his friend down. All he could do was fret.

Was Dean alone?

Was Dean cold?
Was Dean sheltered?

Dean always dressed the same, in jeans and a plain t-shirt and a plaid flannel shirt with a simple gray-and-white motif. His clothing was usually clean, or at least started out that way, growing grass-stained and dirt-smudged as he showed Castiel around, boots darkening with water and jean’s cuffs growing sodden and muddy. The outfit had seemed over-warm for summer, but with the mid-fall freeze coating the surface of the pond with a thin layer of crystalline ice, if Dean had no other clothing beyond the leather jacket he’d donned for their last hike, he must be frigid.

Inside the house was so cold that Castiel’s hands shook as he tried to paint. Originally, when they’d decided which second floor rooms to use for which purpose, Castiel had chosen a windowless interior room for his studio, to minimize distractions, but he’d grown to love the outdoors and when he’d started the book, he’d moved his easel and supplies to the room beside Jimmy’s. Two large windows gave an inspirational view of the backyard. Working now, Castiel frequently glanced outside, hoping to catch a glimpse of his friend, but though the milieu constantly changed – now a flock of crows cawed from an oak whose leaves made a crinkly brown carpet about the tree trunk, now two deer stood where the woods met the field, now a duck drifted morosely in the small thawed circle of clear water at the center of the pond – there was no sign of Dean.

There hadn’t been a sign of Dean for days.

“I could call around if you want, see if any of the neighbors know where he is…” Jimmy’s voice was right behind him, and Castiel startled and turned to find his brother standing at his shoulder, also peering out the window. “Don’t you think it’s weird that you never worried where he came from but now you’re worried that he’s not around?”

“What do you mean?” Castiel asked, frowning.

“Where does he live? We’re a half hour drive from the nearest town. I got the names and addresses for everyone who lives within two miles to invite them to the barbeque. None of them were named Dean. Okay, so he’s not local, that’s fine – but then how does he get here? I’ve kept an eye on the street when he’s visited – there’s not a car pulled into the shoulder, not an extra truck in the neighbor’s driveway, not even a bicycle. He’s young and healthy, clean, his clothing washed, his teeth white, his hair combed, and no one gets that perfect a five o’clock shadow without shaving it that way intentionally. Where’s the mirror? Where’s the washing machine? Where’s the shower? He’s gotta live somewhere. I haven’t wanted to press you on this ‘cause you deserve a friend and I didn’t want to seem like a jealous shallow asshole even though I’m totally a jealous shallow asshole—”

“Remind me later to list all the reasons you’re not a jealous, shallow asshole,” Castiel interjected.

“—sure thing, bro, but what I’m saying is in August, Dean had me paranoid enough that I even ransacked the house to make sure this wasn’t some creepy ‘he’s living in the attic’ thing,” Jimmy concluded.

“If you knew Dean, you’d not have suspected that,” objected Castiel. “He wouldn’t…he’s not…” What was Dean like? Castiel could think of no descriptors that seemed apt, no expressions that would do how great Dean was justice, no words that wouldn’t make Castiel sound attracted to his so-called friend.

Castiel did not want to think about that. Whatever his relationship with Dean was, whatever it might have become, Castiel had Jimmy, after pining for him for a lifetime, and he’d not compound the sins of incest and homosexuality by adding unfaithfulness and adultery.
He’d not give Jimmy cause to be jealous.

“But I don’t know Dean, because he refuses to meet me, and that’s fricken busted, too,” Jimmy insisted. “I haven’t wanted to say anything – Cassie, it’s so unlike you to put yourself out there and spending time with him makes you happy and you always looked hot – both literally and figuratively – when you came back all sweaty and flushed from being out with him—”

“Oh!”

“Oh come on don’t act all scandalized now, I had your dick in my mouth like an hour ago,” Jimmy laughed. Castiel shifted uncomfortably on his stool. They’d had sex – a lot of sex – but Jimmy still initiated, and Castiel still fumbled, and nerves and qualms he could neither explain nor justify kept him from reciprocating the blow jobs that Jimmy gave so freely, kept him from suggesting they do anything else. At least Castiel knew how to stroke his brother to climax; what Jimmy called a hand job wasn’t radically different from masturbation.

Which means he doesn’t actually need me at all. What am I bringing to this relationship?

“Something about Dean is plain fucked up and him disappearing just exacerbates that,” Jimmy concluded.

“I take it you didn’t find him in the attic?” said Castiel dryly, pushing his familiar worries down. Jimmy had refuted Castiel’s concerns repeatedly, asking him to do so again was unfair.

Jimmy shook his head.

“Did you check the basement?” Castiel suggested. Jimmy laughed and nodded ruefully.

“I even checked the cupboard, and set up my cell phone camera to watch the bathroom, but nada,” admitted Jimmy. “So, ya know, that’s good, whatever creepy shit is going on, it’s not that creepy, but seriously, Cassie – doesn’t this worry you?”

“I’m worried that he sleeps in the forest and that the reason he hasn’t come ‘round is that he’s frozen to death,” said Castiel. “Other than that – no, I’m not worried.”

“Always knew you had zero sense of self-preservation,” grinned Jimmy.

“I didn’t hear you complaining about that an hour ago!”

There was a moment of stunned silence, then Jimmy burst out laughing. Warmth spread through Castiel, unfamiliar happiness and contentment.

“I’ve not been as oblivious as you think to Dean’s peculiarities,” Castiel continued more seriously. “He’s...odd...and I wish he’d consent to meet you so that I might know your opinion of him. In my time with him I’ve observed him and tried to find facts to tie to my suspicions...perhaps I should call them my concerns?...but have had no luck. The only nefarious thing I can lay at his feet is his incestuous feelings for his murdered brother. I certainly know no cause to think Dean himself responsible for what happened to Sam.”

“I trust you,” declared Jimmy. Confused, Castiel frowned. “Of course I trust you,” Jimmy repeated, reaching out and wrapping his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, pressing Castiel’s head to Jimmy’s chest. “That means I trust your judgment. If you think that Dean isn’t dangerous, then I believe you. The forecast says it’s gonna warm up tomorrow; how about we go look for your friend?”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Castiel mumbled, the fabric of Jimmy’s shirt drying his lips. Jimmy was
warm and solid and supportive; held close, it was impossible for Castiel to doubt Jimmy’s affection, impossible for him to believe that there was anything wrong with the proximity they were finally, finally allowing themselves.

*I need him to know how committed I am to our relationship. I need him to know that, despite my reticence, I care...*

Sucking in a slow breath, Castiel nuzzled at Jimmy’s belly and slid a hand around Jimmy’s waist, down his side, and under his shirt.

“What has anyone ever told you you’re insatiable?” breathed Jimmy.

“You know they haven’t,” Castiel murmured, taking the shirt between his teeth and tugging up on it. “And I’m not.” The shirt hardly budged. “I just want you.” Castiel was sure he’d seen such things done in movies but apparently he didn’t know the trick. “I’ve always wanted you.” With a growl of annoyance, he grabbed the seam of Jimmy’s shirt with his other hand and pulled it up and out of the way so he could kiss at Jimmy’s abdominal muscles. “And I finally get to have you.”

One of Jimmy’s hands came to rest on Castiel’s head, combed through his hair, and Jimmy muttered indistinct sounds of encouragement as Castiel sucked at Jimmy’s concave belly, kneaded at the small of Jimmy’s gorgeous back. The curve above Jimmy’s rear end – Jimmy’s ass, Castiel, say ass – was Castiel’s favorite of Jimmy’s many pleasing features. Usually, over the years, Castiel hadn’t dared stare when anyone might notice, but watching Jimmy from behind had been safe, watching Jimmy’s behind had been wonderful, private, special, something Castiel did selfishly, just for himself.

Pleasuring Jimmy wasn’t selfish any longer. Castiel was allowed to stare, allowed to touch, allowed to share this bliss.

The cloth of Jimmy’s pants brushed against Castiel’s throat, and Castiel was embarrassed by how long it took him to register that the hardness beneath was Jimmy’s erection, that Jimmy was so turned on by Castiel’s gentle kisses and firm touches that he was at full mast so soon after their last liaison.

*I can do this.*

Tonguing at Jimmy’s belly button – Jimmy liked that, both judging by how often he did it to Castiel and by the little sounds that accompanied Jimmy’s increasingly erratic breathing – Castiel worked a hand beneath the waistband of Jimmy’s pants and drew them aside, drew them down, and freed Jimmy’s cock. The loose cloth fell away to bunch at Jimmy’s ankles, revealing that Jimmy had chosen to forego underwear for the day, and Jimmy’s cock bounced free, smearing thin liquid over Castiel’s skin.

*I can do this.*

Castiel steeled himself and took a deep breath, drawing away from the head of Jimmy’s cock. The loose grip on Castiel’s scalp firmed, but not so much as to stop Castiel’s movement, and Jimmy’s whimpers turned disappointed.

*I can do this.

*I can do this.

*I can—*
Castiel surged forward and wrapped his lips around Jimmy’s cock.

“Cas!”

Bitter, salty flavor flooded Castiel’s tongue and his mind and throat rebelled simultaneously.

No, no, this is wrong, I shouldn’t—

Gagging, he struggled to breathe, eyes watering. Shame curled awfully beneath his skin, quelled the arousal he’d begun to feel. Jimmy had done this for Castiel repeatedly, had gotten off on doing this repeatedly, had drawn Castiel’s cock so deeply into his throat that Castiel’s pubic hairs had gotten caught between Jimmy’s teeth. Castiel had scarce wet the head of Jimmy’s dick and already every fiber of his being screamed for him to spit Jimmy out. He didn’t like the taste of Jimmy’s dick, could hardly force himself to swallow the disgusting liquid that dribbled onto his tongue, and he had no idea what to do next, how to proceed to give Jimmy what he deserved, no guess how to judge if anything he did felt good.

If I cared for him as I should, I would enjoy this. I would want this. I would be willing to do this for him.

This isn’t going to work.

Castiel wasn’t sure what this was but he was sure it was so much more than the blow job.

“Cassie...”

Jimmy sounded heartbroken.

I’m failing him.

He wants this from me.

I have to do better.

Scrunching his eyes closed tight, Castiel forced himself to swallow and nervously flicked at the head of Jimmy’s cock with his tongue. The flavor didn’t improve, but he was expecting it, and remembering all the meals he’d choked down over the years no matter how disgusting, how raw or burnt, how unfamiliar and frightening, he made himself drink his brother down, made himself take more of Jimmy’s length into his mouth. Jimmy’s hand fell away from Castiel’s head, and panic flickered at the edges of Castiel’s mind, seized a vise grip around Castiel’s chest.

I know I’m doing it wrong! I have to do better...I have to do better...

I can do this!

Jimmy’s hands curled under Castiel’s chin, touch gentle yet firm, tugging Castiel back, forcing Castiel’s face from Jimmy’s crotch. Blinking his eyes opened, Castiel looked up at his brother; through blurred vision, he could only make out the paleness of Jimmy’s skin, the near-black of Jimmy’s hair, the glimmering, sad blue of Jimmy’s eyes.

Sad?

“I’m sorry,” said Castiel hoarsely.

“Why?” Jimmy asked, his low, hurt voice a perfect match to his downcast eyes, his frowning lips.
“I want to do this for you,” Castiel explained, stunned that the answer wasn’t self-evident.

This isn’t going to work.

“I know I’m inept but I will improve with practice, I promise,” said Castiel. “Please give me a chance, Jimmy.”

This isn’t going to work.

“That’s not...” Jimmy dropped to a squat and gave Castiel a mournful smile. “You don’t need to force yourself for me, Cassie.”

This isn’t going to work.

“Why did you initiate this if you weren’t ready? Did I make you feel like you had to? What else have I done that you didn’t like? You promised you’d communicate with me, and now...”

Why was I ever foolish enough to think that he and I could make this work?

“Nothing,” protested Castiel. His mouth still tasted like Jimmy’s dick; every time he swallowed his stomach turned. “That’s...that’s the problem. I want to make you feel good, Jimmy, but all I ever do is stroke you, while you do...other things. I want to make you feel as good as you make me feel.”

“Cassie, you do,” Jimmy sighed.

Leaning forward, Jimmy brushed a hesitant kiss over Castiel’s face and Castiel jerked away, eyes filling with tears. Jimmy’s expression was melancholy, his cheeks yet flushed with fading arousal, his shirt askew, his cock growing limp, his hands so close yet not touching Castiel. Everything Castiel saw made him feel worse. With another, bigger sigh, Jimmy deflated, tumbling back onto his rear on the floor.

“What just happened, Cassie? Why won’t you let me kiss you?”

“Because...”

This isn’t going to work. How can I tell him that?

“Look at me, please,” implored Jimmy. “I want...but I guess that’s the problem. Shoulda been asking what you want and instead I thought it’d just...kinda...happen?”

Nerves made Castiel’s hands shake worse than the cold had earlier and he forced himself to meet Jimmy’s gaze. There were tears in Jimmy’s eyes, too.

Castiel had no idea why.

Castiel had no idea what was going on.

This isn’t going to work.

“Brother, trust me,” Jimmy begged.

Right. That easy.

“It...” He made a vague gesture toward Jimmy’s crotch, forcing the words out. “It tasted bad. My mouth is gross. If you kiss me...”
“...then that’s gross? You think my dick is gross?” Jimmy’s voice was thick with disappointment.

As I expected.

“No!” Castiel exclaimed, slumping back in the stool. “I don’t know. It’s not. I love touching you. I love knowing I make you feel good. I love you! I do! But putting my mouth on your penis, or thinking about...other stuff—”

“What other stuff, Cassie?” demanded Jimmy. “Be specific! I’m through making assumptions.”

“You’re mad.”

“I’m not,” said Jimmy angrily. He drew a sharp breath through his nose and hissed it out. “Okay, fine, I am, but not at you. I’m pissed, super pissed, at myself. I’m not an idiot, Cassie. I knew you were inexperienced. I knew there was something holding you back, even if I didn’t know what. But I’ve wanted you for so long...I’ve imagined so many things I wanted to do with you, so many things I wanted to help you feel, that I rushed forward and now you feel you’ve gotta keep up. You don’t. I’ve waited for years. I can wait however much longer I have to until you’re comfortable.”

“But—”

“Trust me,” Jimmy repeated. “Okay – try it this way. What’re you afraid’ll happen if you don’t give me a blow job?”

“God,” said Castiel, fear tightening his throat. “Um. This isn’t going to work. Our relationship. Whatever this is. We’re not just...boyfriends? Are we boyfriends? Whatever we are, we’re also brothers, and we work together. If we break up...”

“Already thinking about dumping me, brother?” said Jimmy with a false, forced smile.

“No! Jesus, Jimmy, why...no...but if I can’t reciprocate your intimacies, you’ll – rightly! – grow bored with me,” Castiel said. “I want to be the kind of partner – the kind of man – you’re used to. I’m sure all of them were comfortable with—”

“Stop. Assuming.” Jimmy’s teeth were gritted; he rolled on to his back, head thunking on the hard wood floor, raking his scalp with his nails. “Fucking hell, Cassie, you have no idea what I’m used to. There was no way in fuck-all I was going to tell you about my sexual partners, and it’s not like you’ve got your own experiences to draw on.”

“If your goal is to set me at ease, constantly reminding me of inexperience and inadequacy is a strange way of going about it,” Castiel grumbled.

This is never, ever going to work.

“Different people like different...stuff...different stimulation, different physical experiences,” Jimmy explained with a semblance of patience. “Sometimes you just...kinda...know that you’ll like something, or that you won’t like something. Sometimes, you’ve gotta try doing it to find out. Sometimes, you try something you think you’ll be into and you’re just...not, and other times you take a chance on something you think is gonna suck and you get off lickity split. Fuck, I can’t believe I said ‘lickity split,’ let’s forget I ever did that. You get the idea. Sometimes the first time you do something, it’s weird – honestly, I’ve never been with anyone who thought sucking cock was awesome the first time ‘round – but, if it doesn’t gross you out too bad, you try again, you take your time, you go slow, and you get used to it – or you don’t.”

“But if I do something that makes you uncomfortable, if you try something that disgusts you, that’s
okay. I’m not gonna get mad. I don’t have expectations. Don’t get me wrong, there’s stuff I’d like to do...I’d love to feel your mouth on me, or rub one off between your thighs, or get a rim job, or give you a prostate massage just to hear the sounds you make...but I never meant to push you, and you gotta stop forcing yourself to do what you think I want. So – Cassie, I know you can’t be so naive as you pretend. You told me you had fantasies about being with me – did you really imagine nothing more than stroking one out while watching me touch myself?"

“That’s it,” Castiel confirmed. “The fantasies never went further than voyeurism. I guess I...I wanted you, no one but you. It was inconceivable to me that you’d reciprocate my feelings, so imagining more seemed like setting myself up for a lifetime of disappointment. Also...um...I don’t...I don’t know what a prostate massage is, or a rim job.”

“Right, time for more lessons with teacher,” said Jimmy, bursting to his feet in a fit of energy. “Judging by your reaction to sucking my dick I think rim job is off the table – that’s using your tongue to stimulate my anal canal.” Castiel blanched, and Jimmy laughed. “Yeah, that’s how I thought you’d react. A prostate massage is where I lube up a finger and work it into your ass until I find your prostate, and I, ya know, massage it.”

“You can find my prostate up my ass?” asked Castiel, glancing doubtfully between his legs. “And that feels good? Isn’t it...disgusting? Dirty?”

“Brother, it feels very, very good, and I can wash my hands afterwards,” said Jimmy, rolling his eyes. “Or we can get an enema kit, though that’s not ideal – they’re kinda unhealthy to do frequently – but maybe until you get comfortable? Nothing gets your insides squeaky clean like an enema. And good – this is good! I’m glad you asked! This is what I mean, we can talk about this stuff and make decisions together.”

“Yeah...yeah, okay,” Castiel nodded. “I should get back to working on this painting.”

“Just like that?” Jimmy sighed. “Are...are we okay, Cassie? Nothing is more important to me than our relationship – and I don’t mean the sex. No matter what happens, you’re still my brother. Whatever else we do together, nothing is more important to me than you being my twin, you being my BFF. I want you to be happy and safe and cared for. I hope I’m the guy who does that for you – God knows I’ve always wanted to be the guy who does that for you – but if I’m not, at least for me, that doesn’t change the other two. So, um...please don’t...like...shut down on me, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” promised Castiel. “One thing in exchange?” Jimmy waited expectantly. “You have got to stop putting yourself down.”

“I will.”

Jimmy took a jittery step toward the door while Castiel straightened and stretched, preparing to get back to work. The floorboards creaked, Jimmy looked away, looked back, then stepped back to Castiel’s side and leaned down slowly, pursed his lips, and telegraphed his intention of kissing Castiel.

Maybe this can work.

Castiel’s eyes slipped shut. Jimmy’s lips met his, warm and confident yet uncertain, the kiss communicating worry though Castiel could not have said how.

The kiss didn’t feel gross.

Castiel’s mouth no longer felt gross.
He had a lot to get used to, a lot to learn, but knowing that he wouldn’t ruin everything by telling his brother honestly how he felt about their activities made a world of difference.

“I’d like to try the prostate massage,” Castiel whispered against Jimmy’s lips.

“Just let me know when you’re ready.” Jimmy kissed the words against Castiel’s mouth, and Castiel smiled.

*If only how much we love each other was, in and of itself, enough to make a relationship function without communication or understanding, we’d be set.*

*We both want to make this work.*

*Hopefully, that will be enough.*

Jimmy turned and left, lips quirked into a smile tinged with the same hope that Castiel suspected shone from his own face. Glancing out the window as he quickly cleaned away the smudges of paint that had dried on his palette, Castiel watched a sharp breeze rattle the branches of the trees. The limp, thin tendrils of the willow whipped and swayed. Yellowed leaves tugged free, swirled in the air, circled like dust devils along the ground, floated on the areas of water yet exposed, and froze into the ice.

*I wish I could talk to Dean. Surely he and his brother discussed these issues and reached some kind of accord. He’s so wise, so open, so strong, and he’s outside of our relationship, outside our family...the things that seem opaque to me would likely be transparent to his insightful gaze...*

...*heck, even if I could just hear his voice again...*

With a sigh, Castiel set brush to paper and resumed his work.

They were almost done with the book, almost set with enough money to see them through the next few months.

They’d have plenty of time to search for Dean, plenty of time to talk through their confusions, when winter shortened the days and the cold huddled them before their fireplace.
Chapter 6

“No, we’ve never seen anyone odd hanging around – why do you ask? Should we be worried about the children?”

“Honey, there was that one young man, do you remember? You said he was handsome and I asked if I ought to be jealous.”

Jimmy and Castiel exchanged a look; Castiel used the opportunity to put his burnt cookie back on the tea cup saucer, only one bite taken. A bitter flavor stung Castiel’s tongue, suggesting that some ingredient had been used to excess – probably baking soda, from what little Castiel knew of the science of baking – and he longed to take a gulp of tea to wash the flavor away but the steam curling thick from his cup suggested the drink was yet too hot to consume.

“Tall? Tanned? Freckles? Short hair? Green…eyes…” Castiel trailed off; Mrs. Merchant shook her head increasingly emphatically as Castiel listed features.

“Tall, yes, quite tall, but he didn’t have freckles,” she explained. “His hair was long for a man, and his eyes were…” She sighed and gazed skyward. “…beautiful.”

“Not that she was paying close attention,” Mr. Merchant added, rolling his eyes but giving his wife a fond smile. They were a doting pair, from what Castiel had seen, with sweet, active children who were currently quietly playing together in one corner of the living room, the eldest son reading the younger a story.

“I took a picture with my phone…let’s see…” Mrs. Merchant rose, adjusted her frilly, old-fashioned blouse and long skirt, and headed toward the kitchen, squinting near-sightedly.

“Forgive her…enthusiasm,” said Mr. Merchant. “As I’m sure you’ve noticed since you moved to the area, we don’t get much excitement up here. It’s easier for me because I’m at the shop most days, but Mrs. Merchant is often here alone, raising the boys, and—”

“Aha!” cried Mrs. Merchant triumphantly, the most exuberance Castiel had heard in her sedate voice since they’d met. She bustled back into the room holding an ancient, blocky phone that was “smart” only by the loosest definition of the term.

Dropping onto the couch beside her husband, she held the screen toward Castiel and Jimmy. The photograph was coarse and grainy but clear enough for Castiel to make out a young man matching the Merchants’ description. It definitely wasn’t Dean.

“His name was Sam,” Mr. Merchant said.

Sam…Dean’s brother…it has to be…

“Good kid – mowed the lawn for us from time to time, used to play with the boys when they were little, and he was great with Polly.” Mrs. Merchant sighed. Jimmy looked a question at her. “Our Golden Retriever. Sam stopped coming around, oh, five years ago? Thereabouts? Figured he went off to college. Clever boy. The date on this picture is…” She took her phone back, poked at the screen, and said, “August 2nd, 2010. Wow, has it really been that long?”

“Polly disappeared, too.” The levity was gone from Mr. Merchant’s voice. His eyes narrowed and he gave Castiel a knowing look. Castiel hadn’t a guess what he was supposed to know. “Gotta be careful ’round these parts. Not everyone is…civilized. You know what I mean.”
Sam was murdered. Does Mr. Merchant know that?

“It’s true,” Mrs. Merchant said with a mournful nod. “While I wish…well, let’s just say that we make sure the boys stick close to home, or visit neighbors we know.”

Are they implying that the fate of their dog was the same as Sam’s fate, and that the culprits are the same? If they knew something like that, why wouldn’t they act? Unless they don’t know, they only suspect…whom do they suspect?

“That seems wise,” said Jimmy, betraying no peculiar interest in the topic. Castiel longed to ask more, but he followed Jimmy’s lead, schooled his expression to polite curiosity, and kept silent. “So what have you thought about…”

Damn the manners that prevent them from openly accusing instead of subtly hinting, and that prevent us from inquiring!

Jimmy politely, expertly segued the conversation to other topics, and Castiel took another bite of his cookie before he remembered that it was gross. The hints and half-spoken suggestions niggled at him. He felt he was reading too much into what the Merchants said, yet simultaneously felt like he was missing oceans of subtext.

Maybe further conversations would help clarify things?

Why think that? Dean knows that Sam was murdered but he has said nothing about the culprits, nothing about justice being done. The Merchants have implied that they know something strange happened as well, and warn about the neighbors without specifying who. Something is rotten, clearly, but no one feels they can act to excise the evil – maybe for fear, or lack of evidence, or any of a dozen other reasons.

Far too often, in villages the world over, Castiel had seen good men keep quiet when faced with monsters.

Dean is not at fault. Dean isn’t the monster in the closet, the vagrant lurking in the attic, the hitchhiker hiding an axe in his coat.

If I had to guess…

Castiel shook the thought away, forced himself to eat the remainder of his cookie, and took a swig of bitter black tea to wash the taste from his lips. He couldn’t help but remember when he and Dean were hiking and heard the gunshot, couldn’t help but recall how Dean deliberately steered them around the Benders’ property. Instincts cried out that they were backward, gap-toothed, dirty, ignorant, and that those were all bad things and that surely being like that made them bad people, but despite the white elite stereotype that poor and uneducated people who lived in rural surroundings were dangerous, Castiel knew better than to judge by such paltry indicators. The rural poor were just people, like everyone else, doing their best to live well and provide their children with ‘the good life.’ Castiel wouldn’t fall prey to the prejudices that his parents had constantly perpetuated, helping those less fortunate but constantly othering them, excluding them, treating them as a different breed, a different species, because they spoke different languages, had different traditions, or had different skin tones.

If only the Merchants had said out-right what they were implying, Castiel could nip his unfair suspicions in the butt and focus on reality.

Maybe their next house call would answer the questions that this one had left them with.
“After Brian lost his job, we thought we’d adventure – like you’re doing, right?” said Susan Carter, leaning forward conspiratorially. Her teenage daughter, whose name Castiel hadn’t caught, rolled her eyes overdramatically. “And it’s been…it’s been great!”

“It’s been terrible,” the girl interjected. “Everyone at school is white and our teacher got upset when I said he shouldn’t be teaching creationism and they’re constantly asking what church we attend and getting all offended when I say we’re Jewish and there’s no cell phone reception!”

“That does not match my experience of the local people,” Castiel suggested, eying Mrs. Carter to be sure he wasn’t offending her. She caught his gaze and nodded encouragingly. “People who live in the country are different than those who live in the city, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

“You’re just like them!” The teen threw up her arms as she spat her incomprehensible accusation at Castiel and stormed from the room.

“Our son has accommodated the move better than our daughter has,” Mrs. Carter apologized. “She misses her friends, and she’s struggling to see the…the value…in learning to understand people who have a different background than she does. She’ll come around.” Mrs. Carter didn’t confident but she put on a hopeful smile and gave a half-shrug. “Truly, we’ve been largely happy since we moved here. There was a learning curve – the first year was rough – but now that we’re used to the house and its quirks, and used to the way the seasons go, and used to the kind of people who live around here, it’s good. Education levels are so low among the natives, I’ve been able to do a lot of good at the BOCES, and Brian’s CPA practice has taken off. There’s such a dearth of trained professionals locally, you know? The people who get advanced degrees leave, and people ‘like us —’” Her gestured air quotes and expression took in herself as well as Jimmy and Castiel. “—don’t usually move to places like this.”

“Which is a pity,” said Jimmy. “The false narrative of the divide between urban, suburban and rural hurts everyone. We need to know each other to understand each other, right?” Watching Jimmy as they made social calls was a favorite hobby of Castiel’s; it was so easy for his brother to enter in to people’s concerns, make small talk, and meet people wherever they were, engage them on whatever topic they ventured on.

“Exactly!” Mrs. Carter beamed.

“I will say, not everyone we’ve met has been so...welcoming nor so understanding as you,” ventured Jimmy. “I went for a hike and some of the neighbors, well...”

“True,” Mrs. Carter sighed. “Some people are all...weird...about their property lines. We didn’t find out until we moved in that some big deal hiking trail passes through the back end of our woods – did you know about that? Like the Appalachian trail but...not the Appalachian trail. Anyway, hikers technically trespass on our land constantly. Sometimes they even camp out, and we’ve had nothing but positive experiences when we’ve met them. A few have told us stories about how pissed some of the others around here get. Apparently, word’s gotten around that we don’t mind, which is why so many camp here instead of elsewhere.”

Maybe Dean is a hiker?

I mean, obviously he’s a hiker, but maybe that’s why he knows so much about nature?

Oh, yeah, that’s a likely explanation for all the incongruities we’ve noticed about him. What, he was on the trail and he got lost so he hung out in our backyard all summer? And his brother was
hanging around with the Merchants kids six years ago? While hiking?

No, Dean isn’t a hiker.

Sam must be Dean’s older brother, given their relative ages. Mrs. Merchant’s picture was years old, and Sam didn’t look young. Damn, I wish I’d thought of that sooner, I’d have looked more closely at the photograph. Maybe I could ask Mrs. Merchant to e-mail it to me. Would that be weird?

That’d probably be weird.

Mrs. Carter and Jimmy continued to talk, but Castiel had nothing to contribute, and he tuned out their conversation and lost himself in taking the scattered puzzle pieces he had and trying to figure out, mentally, how they fit together.

Maybe I should write out flashcards.

“Sorry I wasn’t able to attend your barbeque,” said Lenore quietly. She’d given no last name, and the public records that Jimmy and Castiel had used to address the barbeque invitations had listed ‘John Smith’ as the owner of the estate. The declining RSVP that Lenore had sent listed Lenore, Eli, Seth, Kate, Frank and Celia as those who’d be unable to attend. The house didn’t look large enough to accommodate so many. Though it was well maintained, it was perpetually dark; the curtains were always drawn, and Lenore had suggested they visit at dusk when Jimmy had dropped a note suggesting they “hang out” and meet sometime.

This much darkness seems depressing, but to each their own...

“Eh, no worries, lots of people weren’t able to make it,” Jimmy replied. “Maybe next time!”

“Perhaps,” said Lenore in a tone that even Castiel recognized as meaning that will never happen. She had a quiet affect, and presented herself as small in a way that was familiar to Castiel. Castiel and Jimmy were identical – both five-foot eleven-inches, dark haired, nearly equally slim – yet people regularly thought that Castiel was shorter because of his habit of slumping in on himself among company. If he could have disappeared rather than take up space and draw notice while in a crowd, he would have, and he suspected he’d find Lenore right alongside him, equally desperate to avoid attention.

Awkward silence fell between them.

“What did you think of the neighbors?” Lenore broached tentatively. Castiel startled and looked to Jimmy. “It’s been a long time since anyone has worked this hard to befriend the mountainites. It’s unusual. People talk.”

“Do they?” asked Castiel, surprised. “I never thought about it. Everywhere we’ve lived, social events to get to know those around us have been normal.”

“Our parents were missionaries,” Jimmy clarified as Lenore returned their confused look. “Part of their job was to make wide acquaintances. We moved constantly, and our family hosted events like our barbeque often.”

“Are you missionaries too?” Lenore said. Castiel was used to hearing support or condemnation in people’s voices when they spoke of Castiel’s family’s “cause,” but she sounded strangely neutral.

“Noope, you’re safe,” said Jimmy with a wink. Lenore shrugged noncommittally. “Who’s been
talking about us?"


“Anyone in particular?” ventured Castiel when Jimmy said nothing, a considering look in his eye.

Lenore gave Castiel an unreadable look. “Really? You have no guesses? From what I gather, you’ve met almost everyone. You won’t last long around here if you’re that poor at reading between the lines of your interactions with strangers.”

Won’t ‘last long?’ That sounds like...

Does she mean Dean?

Or...

“An isolated area like this – people come here for their own reasons. It’s safe. Protected. No one to look over your shoulder. No one to wonder where you’ve disappeared to or why you’ve come here. No one to ask who you are or where you came from. When everyone has something to hide, it’s best not to push – ask nothing, expect nothing, tell nothing.” Lenore broke into a gentle smile, brushing dark hair from her pale face. “Isn’t that why you moved here?”

“No, we—”

Lenore’s expressively quirked eyebrow and the increasingly skeptical twist of her lips caused Jimmy to break off and concede the point with a nod.

When we first moved here, I’d have said no, but thinking about it now, knowing what I do? Jimmy cared for me, and I cared for Jimmy, and we both wanted to leave our parents’ legacy behind. And now, where else could we move, where else would we be safe, given the relationship we share? Our seclusion protects us, grants us essential privacy.

“Your guilelessness is endearing but it’s as much a front as my quiet restraint,” Lenore continued. “The faces we show in public are masks. We are very different people behind closed doors. If you’ve got something to hide, perhaps you should be more cautious about opening those doors. Not everyone will see your behavior as harmless. Like I said, people talk.”

Are we being threatened?

“We’ll, um, we’ll keep that in mind,” said Jimmy. “It’s awesome of you to take the time to, uh, warn us?”

But what are we being warned of, and who are we being warned away from?

I wish I had the nerve to ask if she knew Dean.

I can’t believe Dean is the one she’s speaking of...but I didn’t realize over the course of 15 years that my brother was in love with me. How can I trust my own judgment?

I’ll have to see what Jimmy thinks.

“You seem like good people,” Lenore replied with a shrug. “I don’t like seeing innocents get hurt. Perhaps we’ll met again sometime.”

Castiel held Jimmy’s hand as Lenore showed them out to lawn, darkened to full night as they
spoke.

There wasn’t a trace of judgment on her face.

She’s not the danger.

I need to be honest with myself. We’ve spoken with near everyone. Jimmy and I both know – or at least suspect – who the true threat is.

If I needed any proof, I need look no farther than the dread I feel at the prospect of seeing Mr. Bender and his children again.

We go to them tomorrow.

I profoundly don’t want to.

And that says it all.

“That’s my boy with the biggest bear you e’er seen,” leered Mr. Bender, pointing out one particular photograph on a wall mosaicked with glossy Polaroids. Every image showed Bender and his sons hunting, often posed triumphant with the bloody corpse of their kill.

Their home was a tribute to their...hobby seemed like too mild a word. The house smelled of cooked meat, a haunch of something roasted on a spit over a wide-open stove, and the dim light fixture overhead was hung with a mobile composed of jaw bones and animal horns carefully balanced to bob and sway and clatter when a draft blew the pieces against each other. Bender extinguished his cigarette by smashing it into what Castiel thought was the pelvic bone of some large beast, grinned toothlessly at them, and blew a smoke ring in Jimmy’s face.

“And this one here,” Mr. Bender pointed at another image which showed a girl that couldn’t be older than ten trying and failing to support the weight of a deer easily three times her size, blood matting down the animal’s fur and making the girl’s smile into a terrifying rictus. “Missy’s first kill.” He wiped a faux tear from his eye at the memory.

“That’s, um, that’s great!” Jimmy managed to muster a little enthusiasm.

Castiel wished there was anywhere he could look that wasn’t horrifying. His parents had saddled him with a truckload of stereotypes and prejudices about mountain hicks. He tried to see people as individual people instead of monolithic abusable strawmen, but the Benders were so truly every single stereotype that they were practically a mockery of themselves. The more Castiel learned of them, the more they met and exceeded his worst expectations.

“She looks, uh, she looks young,” observed Jimmy in a weak attempt to continue a conversation that Castiel prayed would die already.

“Just 9 years old when that was took,” Mr. Bender agreed. “Shot that doe four times, then used ‘er knife to finish the job. That’s my girl!”

“I’ve heard shots occasionally while hiking,” said Castiel, struggling to sound neutral. “Are there other hunts in the area too?”

“Prob’ly, but that was us,” Bender said. “Most of the damn cowards in these parts won’t hunt outta season, like the gov’ments got any right to tell us when we can and can’t feed our people off the land.”
“Isn’t that illegal?” asked Castiel before he could stop himself.

Jimmy punched him.

“My brother means that you must be taking a risk, right? Rebelling like that?” Jimmy attempted to soften the blow, but Bender’s eyes narrowed with suspicion anyway.

“Ain’t no risk,” sniffed Bender, gaze darkening until Castiel felt compelled to look away. “Who’s gonna know? Who’s gonna tell? You city boys don’t want no bears at your house, right? We’re helpin’, keepin’ the population down. And since we put up the No Trespassin’ signs no more of those damned walkin’ fools have come on our mountain. ‘S good thing, too. Idiots gonna get their kale asses shot, comin’ on my land. Need ‘Stand Your Ground’ in this state, that’s what I say.” Bender scowled as some thought occurred to him. “You’re not some Safe Act supportin’ pussies, are ya?”

“Oh, no, no,” Jimmy said, shaking his head. Bender turned his glare on Castiel.

“I have no idea what that means,” Castiel admitted.

Bender grumbled under his breath. “Anyway, what brings you boys ‘round? Had a nice time at that bar-bee-que o’ yours but can’t say we seemed like we was talkin’ the same language. And thas’ fine. Takes all sorts. Just didn’t think ya’ll were our sort, if ya get mah drift.”

“Just getting to know—”

“Come on, stow the gettin’ to know the neighbors shit,” Bender snapped, spitting on his floor.

Castiel schooled his face to an expressionless mask. The air reeked of cigarette smoke. The floors creaked as if there were people all around them. His nerves flared. Bender had locked the front door when they came in, and every instinct told Castiel that this house was not a safe place to be. His instincts were garbage; Castiel had been nervous many times, and had always emerged fine, but he wanted nothing more than to leave and never talk to Bender again.

“No one does that,” scowled Bender. “So, you rats for the Feds? Undercover? Park Rangers?” Bender’s lips spread into another leer. Gaps between his yellowed, rotting teeth made wide black spaces in his smile. From feet away, Castiel could smell the sickly sweet decay on his breath. “Serial killers?”

“Just neighbors,” Jimmy repeated. “And you mentioned you do maintenance on trees. With so many on our property, we were thinking maybe in the spring you could take a look for us? Assess their viability? Trim any trouble branches, maybe see if any of the trees should be removed?”

“Don’t need no special looksee to tell ya that,” Bender snorted. “That willow’s gotta go. Used to be three on the property, ya know. First went down, oh, thirty, forty years ago now, in a nasty storm – damn thing was so big and overgrown that the only way to get rid of it was to dig out where the roots used to be, that’s where the pond came from. When the owners ‘afore you moved in, we told um, like we told you, to get rid o’ those trees but they ignored us just like you fools’re doin’. They sure learned their lesson. The second tree up ‘n died on um outta nowhere ‘bout six years ago. The damn thing was so big, cost the owners a damn fortune to grind it down to wood chips. Told ‘um to use the wood to fill the pond but they had all these notions ‘bout nature and beauty or some such shit and they wouldn’t hear of it and now look – crawlin’ in mos-qee-toes and ticks and lime disease and all that bull’s balls. You boys wanna know what I think? You tear that willow outta the ground, you fill that pond, you sell that house, and you move back to where you came from and mind your own stinkin’ business.”
Mr. Bender never stopped smiling.

“Well, I guess that’s, uh, that’s that,” said Jimmy. “Cassie – shall we?”

“Yes – yes, let’s go.”

*Don’t turn your back on him!*

Stealing himself, Castiel turned and made himself walk at a measured pace to the front door. Only the clunk of Jimmy’s shoes on the flimsy board floor reassured Castiel that his brother was with him, and only the absolute silence filling the house aside from the sound of their walking reassured him that Mr. Bender wasn’t stalking them, following them, about to attack them.

The lock twisted easily under Castiel’s hand, he pulled the door open for Jimmy, and a burst of chill fresh air struck Castiel in the face like salvation and freedom. He hadn’t realized how dizzyingly, disorientatingly miasmic the air was in the house until he was *out*.

*But Jimmy’s not out yet...*

*Why did I let him talk me into this?*

Stepping more hastily, Castiel resisted the urge to grab his brother’s hand and run for it. Each second that passed tightened a knot in his chest.

Their car was feet away in the drive way, closest in a line of dilapidated vehicles ranging from apparently functional to rusted shells.

Jimmy was outside with him.

The door swung shut behind them.

“Ya’ll don’t come back now,” Mr. Bender shouted, easily audible through the loose glass panes.

“No, let’s not, let’s definitely not,” muttered Jimmy, grabbing Castiel’s hand and dragging him toward their car at a run. “Sorry, brother.”

“It’s okay. We’re okay.”

Something clattered loudly in the house and a shot rang through the air, shattering the silence as if the cold had frozen the world around them. A cacophony of birdsong shrieked out, another shot was fired, and the birds went deathly silent.

Castiel sprinted to the driver’s side, Jimmy threw himself into the passenger’s side, and they jerked their doors shut with simultaneous clatters. Castiel turned the car on, threw it into gear, and drove away as fast as he could. Glancing back at the house, he could swear he saw a blood-streaked young woman grinning at them from one of the windows on the second floor.

“Dean told me that Sam was murdered,” Castiel said, breathing hard. Fear still clenched at his chest.

*Dean never wanted to walk on their property.*

“Yeah, you mentioned that...?”

*Dean said to avoid them. Everyone has hinted that there’s someone dangerous hiding in plain sight amidst the locals. When we’ve mentioned Dean, none of them have known him, but Dean said the*
Benders had lied, implied they’d met. Usually the stereotypes are nothing but lies and prejudice, but occasionally...stereotypes do exist for a reason.

Occasionally, people are exactly what they appear to be.

“Do you think the Benders murdered Sam?”

“If they had, surely someone would have done something about it,” said Jimmy incredulously.

“Would they have?” asked Castiel. “Everyone moved here to start anew, avoid trouble, hide. If they didn’t have proof, would they risk drawing attention to themselves by calling the authorities on the Benders? Would they risk the wrath of those...those psychopathic hunters? Like, what if they brought up charges, they didn’t stick, and the family was free again? If it’s true and they did kill Sam, what might they do to people who accused them of murder?”

“I don’t know.” Jimmy’s face, shadowed as they drove down the darkened country road, looked troubled in the brief glimpses Castiel got when he risked taking his eyes from the road.

“I don’t know, either,” Castiel said. “But it sounds like everyone is in on a secret except us. And I’m starting to suspect the answer is no, that solitude and privacy is more important to our neighbors than justice.”

Jimmy nodded, but said nothing, and unpleasant silence fell. Castiel longed to speak, but his circling thoughts offered no useful additions, so he kept his mouth shut.

Does Dean suspect?

If he does, why hasn’t he reported the crime to the police?

Everyone around us...no, everyone, including us, has so much to hide.

What, or who, is Dean hiding from? What’s his secret?

Next time I see him, I have to ask.

No. It’s none of my business. I have to respect Dean’s privacy and mind my own business. If we’d done that in the first place none of this mess would be on our doorstep.

Everyone minding their own business is what allows the Benders to kill with impunity.

Assuming they’ve killed anyone.

But I haven’t any proof of that, just suspicions, and I won’t go to the authorities with nothing more than suspicions either.

We fit in around here depressingly well.

“Why does everyone keep telling us to chop down our willow tree?” asked Jimmy sourly.

Castiel shook his head. He didn’t know. He didn’t know what was going on, or what they could do about the situation, or if they should do anything about the situation. He didn’t know what the trees had to do with anything, or why the willows kept coming up in their conversations. All he wanted was to get home, snuggle his brother, and find Dean.

At least he’d be able to do two of those things shortly.
Until we know what’s going on, truly know what’s going on, I’ll not risk either of us – I’ll not risk Jimmy – by speaking up out of turn.

But I won’t let this lie.

The answers are out there, tangled up in the clutter of irrelevant information. If I can find the right pieces and put the puzzle together, I can find out the truth, protect my brother, protect myself, and help Dean.

No more excuses. No more pretending this doesn’t impact us. We live here now, and we’ve made friends, and one bad apple could yet spoil the bunch.

Oh God we’ve been here less than six months and I’m already picking up folksy analogies. Our parents would be so proud.

Castiel pulled up in front of the house, parked in the garage, and took a deep breath to calm his nerves before stepping out into the darkness.

It’s time to get to work.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Castiel’s collection of flashcards made a disorganized pile on his desk. Flipping through them, he tried for the umpteenth time to place them in a coherent order.

The first willow tree dies. (40 years ago – circa 1987?)

Missy Bender is born. (approx. 2002)

Robert Singer dies. (approx. 2009)

Sam stops visiting the Merchant family. (fall, 2010)

The second willow dies. (fall, 2010)

The Benders chop up the second willow and run the pieces through their wood chipper. (fall, 2010)

Sam is murdered. (date unknown)

Missy Bender kills her first deer. (approx. 2011)

The Carter family move to the area. (Spring, 2014)

Dean squabbles with the former owners of our home. (until May, 2017)

Dean introduces himself to me. (May, 2017)

Jimmy and I host the Labor Day BBQ. (September, 2017)

Dean and I hear a gunshot in the woods. (September, 2017)

There were more, many more, data points, but no matter how Castiel grouped them – chronologically, by involved party, by who had told him the information – he could make no sense of them. Most were surely irrelevant. There was no secret meaning behind the age of the Merchant children, or behind the date when Missy Bender shot a doe, or related to when the innocuous Carters moved to their house. Jimmy had suggested individual dated cards for each event, a method he’d used to organize the plots of longer stories, but all the method did was drown Castiel in details that he had no means of determining the relative importance of. The trees, for example, couldn’t be important – they were only trees for goodness sake! – yet Castiel couldn’t bring himself to dismiss their significance.

My very first conversation with Dean started because he was defending the willow tree. Everyone we’ve spoken to about maintaining the property has suggested we remove it, insisted it’s a hazard. It means something to me, that I weight Dean’s single voice so much higher than the half-dozen who have contradicted him. It means something that Dean thinks the tree significant. Further, that he placed his shrine to Sam on the stump of the tree that the Benders put through the wood chipper stretches credulity, considering what I suspect the Benders of doing.

Or maybe it doesn’t stretch credulity. Maybe it’s completely plausible that a cigar is just a cigar.

The willow tree is just a tree.
With a frustrated tch, Castiel snatched up the flashcards at random, stacked them, threw the pile on Jimmy’s desk, and turned away. A breeze rattled something loose on the exterior of the house – Castiel didn’t know what but it had been happening regularly, loud enough to be a constant irritation whenever the wind kicked up. It had been almost a month since he’d seen Dean, but increasingly, that wasn’t what worried Castiel. As much as Castiel missed Dean, it was Dean’s prerogative to come and go as he would, pursue or terminate their friendship as he might.

Two days ago, when Castiel had glanced out the window in the morning, the angel had been on her side on the tree stump, scarf pinned beneath her, flapping in the wind.

She was still on her side.

Even if Dean were avoiding Castiel, even if Dean were tremendously busy, Castiel couldn’t believe Dean would allow the shrine to remain in such a state. When the shriveled, dead corpse of the honeysuckle remained curled and twined amidst the browning moss and random assortment of commemorative objects, Castiel thought it odd but told himself that there might be a reason – perhaps something about the cycle of nature and the importance of decay as the mirror to growth. After all, Dean didn’t clear away the lichen and moss slowly decomposing the tree stump, even though the inevitable, long term result of that growth would be the destruction of the shrine. The dead leaves might be there for a reason.

But Dean would never leave the angel fallen.

All summer, Dean had maintained the shrine assiduously: kept it clean, cleared away debris, protected the plants around it. Even when Castiel hadn’t seen Dean for days, evidence of his care and attention could always be observed – the objects had been moved around, or a new one placed, or a curling vine had been moved to a new location, or a seedling whose nature hadn’t been previously clear was now uprooted, or protected.

There’d been no sign of Dean maintaining the shrine in weeks.

Something’s wrong.

Why would Dean leave her like that?

I can’t leave her like that.

I don’t know how to find Dean. Whatever is wrong with him, I can’t help, but I can maintain Sam’s monument in Dean’s absence. It’s the least, truly the least, that I can do.

Resolution made, Castiel hurried down the stairs. The conversations with their neighbors had been fruitless, frustrating and, ultimately, frightening. Castiel had no desire to interact with any of them again, especially not the Benders, and for all the trouble they’d gone to and time they’d spent, they’d learned nothing to help them find Dean. As soon as the weather had broken enough to be tolerable, Castiel had bundled up, donned wool-lined boots, a down jacket, a hat and gloves, and checked every corner of their property, ventured far and wide through the surrounding forest. He had searched for Dean, but more than that, he had looked for sign of anyone. From what the neighbors had said, strange people wandered through the woods continually but Castiel had been unobservant enough that he’d not noticed. Furthermore, if Dean lived in the woods, there had to be evidence of it. Castiel knew nothing about tracking but disturbed leaves were disturbed leaves.

Castiel found the trail that Mrs. Carter had mentioned. He found places, oh-so-many places where the leaves were disturbed, where litter had been left, where suspiciously human-like feces made piles, where fires had burned, where tents had been pitched, but he found no sign of Dean. The
longer he looked, the more he was forced to accept that even should there have been evidence of Dean, Castiel had no ability to recognize it.

Sam was murdered. Dean said that whoever did it didn’t even leave a body.

Was the culprit caught?

If there’d been a murder, if it had been unsolved, if there had been a scandal where some local was arrested and convicted, someone would have talked about it. The Merchants, maybe, talking about their worries about letting their sons play alone outside, or Mr. Bender with that perverse delight he shows whenever he’s talking about another living creature suffering...

With a final, unnecessary pat, Castiel finished tying on his boots, tugged his hat on, and headed to the back door. Stepping on to the porch, Castiel gasped. The house had been warm, his and Jimmy’s winterization efforts effective at keeping in the heat and keeping out the drafts, and he’d not realized how cold it was out. Most of the places that Castiel had lived had stayed mild through much of the fall; the Shurleys had never done a mission in the north. It was only late October here; Castiel dreaded the depths of winter.

Suck it up, Castiel.

Hurrying, Castiel skipped down the stairs, the familiar creaks catching his ear.

Should ‘Dean doesn’t cause stairs to creak’ get a flashcard?

His feet followed the worn path through the grass. The blades were browned now, the flowers dead, and the wind howled a chill lamentation.

No, that’s ridiculous. Of course the stairs creak when Dean steps on them, I was simply too absorbed in my painting to notice. And chill lamentation? Really, Castiel? It’s cold. It’s winter. It’s not a horror novel, it’s your backyard.

Dean probably went to Florida for the winter and forgot to tell me.

If you believe that, I’ve a timeshare that you might want to invest in...

Shaking his head, smiling at his silent joke, Castiel reached the shrine and paused to assess the situation. The overturned angel was the most obvious sign of neglect, but up close there were others. Honeysuckle grew rampant, dead leaves obscuring the items beneath, grown out of control. Castiel decided to start there. Dropping to his knees, he snapped the brittle stems easily and gently, carefully disentangled the vines that had grown over the angel, around the memorial items, and surrounding the tree trunk. It was a slow, meticulous process; Castiel didn’t want to damage the plant, or the surrounding growth, or any of the delicate objects that Dean had carefully assembled. Leaves crumbled between Castiel’s fingers, scattering brown flecks over everything, and his nose tickled when a wind kicked up and set the fragments swirling.

“What are you doing?”

Shocked, Castiel squawked, tried to leap to his feet, lost his footing on the slope leading down to the pond and tumbled to his butt.

“Dean?” he exclaimed. “Dean! You’re alright!”

Twisting around, Castiel saw Dean standing behind him, looking tall and intimidating as he stood on the hill above Castiel silhouetted against the pale blue fall sky.
“Yeah, Cas, I’m fine.” Dean didn’t sound fine. He sounded hoarse, exhausted, voice thin and reedy.

“Have you been sick?” asked Castiel hesitantly, planting his hands and pushing himself up. Facing Dean, no longer blinded by the brightness of looking straight into the sky, it was even more obvious that Dean wasn’t well. He appeared…diminished. His leather jacket covered his familiar outfit but it seemed over-big; Dean’s shoulders hunched beneath it, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jeans. His cheeks were hollow, his formerly gleaming eyes flat, and his lips were pale with the cold and compressed into a thin line.

“Somethin’ like that,” Dean harrumphed. “None o’ that answers my question, though.”

“Question?” echoed Castiel blankly.

“What’re you doin’, Cas?”

“Oh,” said Castiel. “Oh, uh…you haven’t been around. I’ve been really worried, and then something knocked the angel down. I wanted to stand her back up and make sure that Sam’s memorial was cleaned up for the winter.”

“Really?” asked Dean, gaze flicking from Castiel to the angel he’d not yet righted and back again. Castiel nodded. “Wow. That’s, uh…” He whooshed out a breath that misted in the air before his face. “That’s awesome of you. Thanks, Cas.”

“It’s my pleasure, Dean,” said Castiel, rolling to his knees and continuing to gather the dead honeysuckle vines. “You’re my friend and I want to help. I wish you’d tell me what’s the matter.”

“It’s nothin’,” said Dean. He dropped to his knees beside Castiel and gathered the leaves into a pile. “Same old, same old. Winters are rough, man.”

“Don’t worry about the vines.” Castiel gestured to a huge mound of leaves at the back corner of the property. “I’ll use the wheelbarrow to add them to the compost.” Dean nodded and turned his attention to helping Castiel clear out the debris. Side by side, they worked in silence.

In an effort to avoid damaging the ecosystem around their home, Jimmy and Castiel had decided that they’d rake – they didn’t want to kill the lawn, and the pond had been choked with detritus – but they’d researched composting and created a pile so they could use the resulting soil to start a vegetable garden the next year. They had enough land and based on their research, anything they could do to reduce the amount of their property they mowed would be an improvement on the current situation. They had exactly zero use for an acre of neatly trimmed grass, it was expensive and time consuming to maintain, and mowing damaged the habitat. A plastic bin in the kitchen made a receptacle for gathering compostable material from the house, and Castiel was optimistic that by spring they’d have at least a start on some usable compost to enrich their soil.

Castiel wasn’t sure when he started talking, why he decided to describe their plan to Dean, but the silence weighed on him. He’d missed Dean so much, and they’d always had so much to talk about before, yet now awkward silence hung between them like a pall. Castiel used to excite Dean’s curiosity, and Dean invariably excited Castiel’s, so how could they have nothing to talk about? Usually, Castiel wasn’t the sort to feel that quiet had to be filled – he liked silent contemplation, liked sharing a space with someone with whom he was so comfortable that communication was unnecessary – but this quiet felt different. There was a strain there, and Castiel wasn’t sure why.

“So, uh, what kind of veg are you planning to grow?” Dean asked. There was a glimmer of his usual joie de vivre in his tone but mostly he sounded exhausted, and his effort to clear away the
dead plants was listless and dilatory. Gone was the boundless energy that he’d brought to every activity throughout the summer; glancing at Dean covertly from the corner of his eye, Castiel instead caught constant signs that something was wrong.

**But Dean said he’s fine, that this is normal for him, and it’s not my place to push.**

**Maybe it’s...seasonal allergies?**

**Ha. Ha. Ha. Castiel the comedian.**

Dean’s probably sick, probably starving, living alone in a cave or something. There must be some way I can help him...it’s only October. The cold weather has scarce begun and already he looks so diminished. How will he survive the winter?

“We’ve been researching local cultivars,” Castiel explained. “We’ve found a few online sources for heirloom seeds, and we’re going to grow corn, tomatoes, potatoes, beans, squash, that kind of thing. We’ve already started to pick out varieties, and we bought a portable greenhouse so we can sprout them. We were also thinking we’d replant the berry bushes that were ripped out, and maybe place some new ones along the borders of the mowed area. Also, we’re going to let a good chunk of the backyard go wild – stop mowing it, let nature take its course.” Dean scowled. “If you think that’s a good idea?”

“What? Oh, yeah, sure,” said Dean. “That’s an awesome idea. You’ll have to watch out to make sure that invasives and crap weeds don’t take over the plot but I think you’ve got a pretty good idea what you’ll have to watch out.”

“What we’ll have to watch out for?” Castiel asked. Dean looked at him blankly. “You’ll help make sure we don’t get overrun with crown vetch, won’t you?”

“Course I will,” said Dean hollowly. Concern clenched Castiel’s chest tight. “That’s a pretty ambitious garden…” Dean trailed off and gave Castiel a hopeful half-smile, trying to steer the conversation in a new direction so flagrantly that even Castiel recognized his efforts.

_Maybe I’ve misread this completely. What if he’s dying of cancer or something, like, he lost everything because of the medical bills and he can’t afford more treatment so he’s homeless and expects to freeze or something?_

_But that doesn’t explain Sam, or the Benders, or the willow trees, and I really have to stop thinking anything is going to explain the damn willow trees. They’re trees._

**Nothing about this fits together.**

“We’ve gardened before,” Castiel said with a sigh, allowing himself to be diverted. “I’ve mentioned our family moved a lot? Many of the places we lived, subsistence plots were common, and as a show of solidarity with ‘the natives’ we would pretend to cultivate as they did. In practice, the gardens were more for show – local currencies were generally so depreciated that our US money was worth more than enough to buy everything we needed – but Jimmy took to it. I wish you could meet him; of the two of us, he’s the green thumb. Half the time when I tell him about some plant you’ve told me about, he looks at me like I’m nuts for not recognizing it myself, because don’t I remember when we lived in blah blah blah and the locals ate blah blah blah blah?”

“Maybe...maybe sometime,” Dean said in a tone of voice that screamed _never_. “Speaking of Jimmy...?”

_Wait, do you want to meet him?_
“Castiel, you know that’s not what he means…”

“Things are…things are good.” Nervous, Castiel side-eyed Dean to see his reaction, hoping he wouldn’t have to explain more. Dean broke into a broad smile, the most genuine one that he’d worn since he’d appeared behind Castiel.

Not appeared. He comes from somewhere. He goes somewhere.

“Dean I…I wish…” Castiel steeled himself.

It’s none of my business, but… “If there was some way I could help you this winter, you’d tell me, right? Anyway at all…if you need money. If you need a place to stay. If you need food. If you need warm clothes. If there’s anything that Jimmy or I can do to help you, you can’t possibly think we’d refuse you!”

“Thanks, Cas.” Dean’s smile went sad, his formerly lustrous, now lusterless eyes downturned. “I know I look bad right now but try not to worry too much, ‘kay? I’ll be fine. I’m always fine.” The bleakness of the day combined with the melancholy in Dean’s voice and the signs of illness marring his face to leave Castiel convinced that his friend had never been further from fine, but Castiel didn’t know what more he could do. ‘I’m damn glad to hear things are workin’ out between you and your brother. You deserve to be happy, more’n anyone I’ve ever met ‘ceptin’ maybe Sammy. Come on, let’s get this statue upright. You won’t be able to do it alone – ma is heavier than she looks.”

Ma?

He did say the angel was crying because her son was dead.

Mary. His mother’s name is Mary. This is a likeness of his mother, so the angel’s name is also Mary.

How appropriate.

The wood was cool beneath Castiel’s hands even through the thick wool of his gloves as he took one side of the sculpture and Dean wrapped his hands around the other. Dean's hand brushed over the skin exposed between the top of Castiel's mittens and the bottom of his jacket sleeve, and Castiel couldn’t honestly say which was colder: Dean’s fingers or the wood.

“Ready?” asked Dean. Castiel took his hands away from the sculpture. “Gonna take that as a no. What’s up?” Castiel tugged his gloves off. The cold instantly froze his hands, made ice of the sweat the wool had formed on his palms, and his conviction grew that he was doing the right thing. He held the gloves out to Dean. “Naw, I’m good.” Frowning, Castiel held them out again, insistent. “Aw, come on, Cas…”

“Dean, if you won’t take the gloves, I will come over there and make you wear them,” said Castiel. “I’d like to see you try,” grumbled Dean.

Their gazes met.

“You think you can stop me right now?” Castiel challenged.

There was a familiar, lovely spark of inhuman green in Dean’s eyes.

Dean sighed, took the gloves, and tugged them on, muttering under his breath.

He doesn’t think he can stop me right now. Something is the matter with him.
It had to be Castiel’s imagination, but he thought some of the color returned to Dean’s winter-paled
cheeks, that the green in Dean’s eyes flared and flecked with gold.

*At least that helped. God knows it’s little enough.*

“*Now are you ready?*” said Dean, wrapping hands around the gorgeous angel sculpture once more.

“Yes, I am,” Castiel replied with a smile.

Together, they heaved. The wood creaked, the angle shifted, and with matching grunts of effort, Dean and Castiel tugged Mary to her carved feet.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said when they got the angel upright again.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said when they cleared the vegetative matter from around the stump.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said when they righted the collected trinkets and knickknacks. For the first
time, Dean told Castiel some of the stories behind the keepsakes. They were nothing too strange,
anecdotes of better times, but clearly items and stories both meant the world to Dean and Castiel
 treasured them for that.

“Thanks, Cas,” Dean said when they parted ways some hours later.

Castiel’s hands were frozen and coated in dirt, but the stump was clean and the angel mourned as
she should, bundled against the cold in a scarf, demon-head medallion once more dangling over her
carved breasts. Though Dean was still gaunt, he smiled, he laughed, and his eyes gleamed far
brighter than they should have in the muted gray sunlight.

By the time Castiel returned to the house, Dean was gone, though there was scarce cover in
walking range. He must have sprinted to the woods to be so completely out of sight; based on how
Dean had huffed and puffed doing simple gardening tasks, Castiel doubted he could run anywhere.

*How should I word that flashcard? ‘Dean disappears at will?’ That’s even crazier than including
flashcards for the damn trees.*

Stepping into the house, Castiel strode to the front closet by the main door, pulled it open, and
ransacked his and Jimmy’s winter things. They didn’t hoard belongings – they’d moved too many
times to own more than minimal clothing – but nonetheless they had more than they needed. No
matter how cold the winter might grow, they still could each only wear one pair of gloves, one
scarf, one hat, one coat. His efforts produced a long scarf in an obnoxious shade of green that a
distant relative had made them that would complement Dean’s skin tone nicely, a violently pink
hat that Jimmy had gotten Castiel as a gag gift, a pair of mittens which neither twin would wear
because they hated how sweaty their fingers got, and a good coat that they’d not been able to bring
themselves to get rid of even though it fit neither of them. Gathering up his trove, Castiel hurried
back outside, ignoring a shouted question from Jimmy, and hastened into the backyard.

*Where…?*

He glanced at the various landmarks, assessing the viability of each as a safe place to put the
clothing where Dean would find it. Leaving the winter gear on the stump made no sense, leaving it
in the open made no sense, leaving it on the back porch made no sense, but there was one place
Castiel always saw Dean, one place protected from the wind even in the winter.

...*there!*
The branches of the willow tree swayed continually but the leaves piled on the ground beneath were still. Bundling everything up in the coat, Castiel left the things in a niche formed by two roots and a curved hollow in the willow trunk.

Dean didn’t appear, didn’t say “Thanks, Cas” again, but the pile was gone when Castiel stepped out to check the next morning.

“You’re welcome, Dean,” he murmured despite himself, shaded by the branches of the tree. A sharp breeze stirred the branches, swirled the leaves, and Castiel almost thought he heard a whisper, as if Dean said “Thanks, Cas” in precisely the same way, with the same inflection, the same rich warmth in his voice.

_You’re welcome, Dean. Stay well, please. Stay safe._

Chapter End Notes

Plants mentioned for the first time this chapter:

Bean: protection, love.

Corn (aka maize): sun, harvest, protection.


Potato: flexibility, healing, sustenance.

Squash: fertility, plenty.

Tomato: passion.
“Hope you weren’t planning to do anything this morning, cause the forecast says 4 to 14 inches of snow,” mumbled Jimmy, staring bleary-eyed at his phone.

“That’s an unhelpfully broad estimate,” Castiel replied, blinking away drowsiness.

The curtains were drawn and the meager gray light that crept around the edges of the fabric gave no hints what time it was. If there was a storm, Castiel supposed didn’t matter. Even modest snowfall trapped them in the house until the county plows could make it up the mountain. They weren’t going anywhere, nor did they had no work to do.

More than week had passed since they had, with the usual attendant terror, packaged up all their hard work and shipped it certified and insured to New York City, with scans of the artwork on their home computer in case the worst should happen. Since then, they’d pitched their agent several new ideas, and now the ball was in her court. Until she sent them feedback on her preferences and what she thought would sell, there was no point starting a new project. Jimmy had spent the last few days writing silly poems, joking all the while that maybe he could take a stab at being the next Shel Silverstein.

“To be Silverstein, you’d need to be able to draw,” Castiel had pointed out dryly.

“Shock!” Jimmy had swooned, dramatically affronted. “Will my brother not illustrate for me?”

“I could but then you’d not be Silverstein...”

Castiel passed the time by starting a new sketchbook. Page by page, he filled it, sketching the willow tree (and Dean standing beneath the willow tree) and the stump (and Dean sitting on the stump) and the pond (and Dean wading in the pond) and the forest (and Dean walking through the forest).

Jimmy had very pointedly said nothing about Castiel’s new-found drawing obsession. Depicting Dean hale and healthy, as he’d appeared over the summer, helped keep Castiel’s worries at bay as fall tumbled headlong into winter. It wasn’t Thanksgiving yet, but the surface of the pond was frozen, the trees were bare, several branches had already fallen in the early storms, and a thin layer of snow had persisted for over a week. After the first snowfall, which had scattered maybe an inch of tiny, light flakes that blew and swirled and drifted on the wind, the Merchants had stopped by and scoffed that Castiel and Jimmy thought this winter was off to a harsh start.

“Climate change,” Mrs. Merchant had lamented.

“Not real – a liberal scam,” Mr. Merchant had said dismissively before asking where the bathroom was.

“Climate change,” Mrs. Merchant repeated emphatically as soon as her husband left.

Getting up to use the bathroom, Castiel crossed to the shades and pulled them aside. As the forecast had predicted, flakes were already falling thick and white. Visibility was nil. Castiel couldn’t make out the line of the woods; for all Castiel could see the hilltop peak on which the house was built might have been floating on a fluffy cloud. Enough snow had already fallen – an inch or two on top of what was already on the ground – that all but the tips of the tallest mown blades of grass were buried. The surface of the pond was a smooth, unbroken carpet of white, but the reeds surrounding it sprung up, vividly tan against the white backdrop, and the trees stood like
dark sentinels around the lawn. The air was so still that every individual branch of the willow had
dots of white clinging to.

“Come back to bed,” moaned Jimmy, rolling over and putting an arm over his eyes to block out the
light.

“In a moment,” Castiel promised.

Castiel did have plans for the day, but they were nothing the snow would interfere with, and he
didn’t think Jimmy would have any complaints.

When Castiel returned from relieving himself, Jimmy was stretched out in bed, sinfully gorgeous,
irresistibly tempting – not that Castiel had any intention of resisting, not anymore. Blankets draped
over Jimmy’s still figure, bunched up under his nose, shadowed his closed eyes; only his hair and
his arms, both stretched over his head, were exposed. A warm washcloth made a comforting
weight in Castiel’s hand. Lifting the blankets at the foot of the bed carefully, Castiel stole beneath.
Jimmy mumbled something about cold and arched languidly, joints popping quietly in succession,
a chuckle suggesting he had some guess what Castiel was up to.

Groping blindly beneath the blankets, Castiel pulled Jimmy’s loose flannel pants down and wiped
Jimmy’s cock with the warm, damp cloth. Jimmy groaned and twisted, laying his hips flush with
the bed. His cock was yet soft, but under Castiel’s ministrations it thickened and twitched. Only
when Castiel was sure that Jimmy was clean did he shimmy farther under the blankets. He cupped
Jimmy’s balls with the washcloth, accidentally bumped his nose on Jimmy’s hip bone, and
carefully licked a stripe up Jimmy’s burgeoning erection. Jimmy groaned again, deep and guttural,
and hitched his hips up toward Castiel’s mouth.

“Nothin’ you don’t want to do, Cassie,” Jimmy breathed. “You stop any time if you’re not
comfortable.”

He really means that.

“I know, brother.” Castiel blew the words directly over Jimmy’s sensitive flesh and heat buzzed
beneath his skin as Jimmy thickened toward Castiel’s mouth, his testicles shifting against Castiel’s
fingers.

We really might be able to make this work.

Wow.

Jimmy still tasted strange, and licking Jimmy’s cock still triggered the voice in Castiel’s head that
screamed that what Castiel was doing was very wrong, and irredeemably dirty, that Jimmy urinated
from that slit that Castiel’s tongue had just run over, that Jimmy’s pubic hair was a hive of germs
and worse. None of that was true; Castiel had read up on male hygiene since his first attempt at
giving his brother a blow job, and intellectually he now understood that Jimmy was as clean or
dirty as he kept himself – and both brothers were fastidious now that they had daily access to hot
running water and high quality soap. Emotionally, Castiel’s responses reflected a lifetime of
internalized homophobia, but at least now he recognized that for what it was.

I can do this.

I want to do this.

In the past when Castiel had attempted this, he’d thought haste would quell his fears and had only
succeeded at panicking himself more quickly. There was no need for celerity. Jimmy was clean –
had showered the night before, and Castiel had sponged him off for good measure – and Castiel
thought, Castiel hoped, that all he needed was time to get used to the musky taste, the leaking
liquid, the involuntary jerks and twitches. Blood pounded in Castiel’s ears and Jimmy didn’t try to
hold back his soft encouraging moans.

Castiel had spent weeks educating himself, mentally and emotionally preparing himself to lavish
his brother’s dick with the tender attention Jimmy deserved.

Castiel placed gentle kisses and kittenish licks over Jimmy’s cock, learning the shape of it beneath
his lips as he had learned the feel of it in his hand. Jimmy flesh was warm, the skin soft and smooth
though the flesh beneath was hard and growing harder. Castiel’s cock stirred, dull pleasure
thrumming through his limbs. Beneath him, Jimmy shook with the need to restrain himself.
Though Castiel was prepared for Jimmy to move, to thrust, to seize Castiel’s head in his hands, no
touch came. Castiel was simultaneously grateful and disappointed. On the one hand, he longed for
proof that Jimmy appreciated his lame attempt at a blow job, but on the other, if Jimmy were
forceful, Castiel feared he’d lose his nerve.

Tentatively, Castiel lapped at the head of Jimmy’s cock. The flap of skin that opened to form the
slit looked tiny, not that Castiel could see it as he lay in the increasingly sultry air trapped under the
blankets, but against his tongue it seemed prominent. Steeling himself, Castiel forced himself on to
the first test. When aroused, Jimmy leaked early release. Castiel had used it to slick his hands in the
past when he’d stroked and teased and rubbed his brother to climax, and he’d brought himself to
the point of tasting the liquid by licking it from his hands. Could he cope with having Jimmy leak
the watery substance directly into his mouth? Any time now…

Not urine, not urine, it’s not pee, Jimmy is not peeing in my mouth…

“Cas…Cas, I can’t…” whimpered Jimmy, squirming against the mattress. A gap opened beneath
the blankets and a burst of pleasantly cooler air drove home how hot Castiel was. The atmosphere
had grown so close that Castiel could see it as he lay in the increasingly sultry air trapped under the
blankets, but against his tongue it seemed prominent. Steeling himself, Castiel forced himself on to
the first test. When aroused, Jimmy leaked early release. Castiel had used it to slick his hands in the
past when he’d stroked and teased and rubbed his brother to climax, and he’d brought himself to
the point of tasting the liquid by licking it from his hands. Could he cope with having Jimmy leak
the watery substance directly into his mouth? Any time now…

…and whatever comes out, I’ll drink it down…

I can do this…I can do this…I can do this…

Jimmy groaned, pushed his hips down so hard against the bed that the mattress bounced, and tangy
liquid spilled onto Castiel’s tongue. Prepared, the reassuring mantra repeating in his head, Castiel
was proud that he didn’t gag, didn’t start, didn’t spit; he swallowed, licked at Jimmy’s slit, teased
more liquid free and swallowed.

“Oh…oh, fuck…”

The throaty, desperate sounds Jimmy made were all the reward Castiel needed; Jimmy liked when
Castiel stroked him but nothing Castiel had done with his hand had elicited such needy, desperate
noises. Emboldened, Castiel spread his lips and sank his head lower, taking the bulbous nub of
Jimmy’s cock into his mouth.

Bulbous nub? That…doesn’t sound hot…

The ridge that separated cock head from shaft seemed made to rest against Castiel’s lips, and
containing Jimmy warm and secure and leaking in Castiel’s mouth was good, better than he’d expected, far better than he’d feared. He tried to lower his head farther but his nerves rebelled, his teeth accidentally brushed Jimmy’s sensitive flesh, and Castiel aborted the attempt. He didn’t have to be perfect. Heck, he suspected that if he was so much as barely adequate, Jimmy would be satisfied. With a burst of inspiration, he wrapped his warm hand around the length of exposed shaft and stroked gently, slowly, as he let himself grow accustomed to Jimmy’s bulk spreading his lips, Jimmy’s weight against his cheeks, Jimmy’s release dribbling onto his tongue, Jimmy’s musky scent suffusing his mouth and nose and lungs. Saliva pooled thick in Castiel’s mouth, and though he tried, he could find no way to keep it from leaking out between his slack lips. Embarrassment dulled his enjoyment and pride; he was making a mess. Sure, Jimmy had much more experience than Castiel had, but he couldn’t believe Jimmy had been this inept at giving head even when he was first learning.

“Feel so good,” Jimmy breathed as if reading his mind, reading his doubts. Spit ran down Jimmy’s length, slickened Castiel’s palm, and his strokes on Jimmy’s cock grew smoother, faster, rougher. “Aw, Christ…so good, brother…”

Focused as he was, Castiel had missed the myriad small signs that Jimmy was truly enjoying Castiel’s attempts. Jimmy’s breaths came as desperate pants, his hips rolled minutely against the mattress, and at some point Jimmy’s hands had come to rest at his sides, fingers tugging against the sheet so hard that the corners had popped free.

I’m doing this to him.

Imagine how much more he’d enjoy it if I were better at it!

I’ll practice. I’ll learn. I’ll be the partner that Jimmy – that my brother – deserves.

Experimentally, Castiel bobbed his head up and down, matching the up-and-down of his head to the strokes of his hand. Jimmy gasped, tensed, groaned, relaxed, leaked small, pleading noises with every breath. Some of Castiel’s movements took Jimmy deeper into Castiel’s mouth, but mostly he tried to keep his motions small, afraid he’d gag and ruin everything. Every time Castiel took Jimmy deep pleasure jolted through Castiel. The longer he worked, the less ashamed he felt of the thick rivulets of spit and pre-come escaping his mouth; instead, Castiel felt increasingly turned on by the wetness beading over his chin, dripping onto his hand, pool at the base of Jimmy’s cock. The wet squelch of his hand massaging up and down Jimmy’s cock was dizzying, the constant stream of Jimmy’s pre-release diffusing into Castiel’s mouth was as intoxicating as a shot of Glenfiddich, and Castiel was drunk on Jimmy’s taste, drunk on his scent, drunk on the sounds Jimmy made and the feel of his skin and how incredibly good Castiel felt knowing that he made Jimmy feel good.

“Cassie!” Jimmy exclaimed, voice strangled. There was a note of alarm in Jimmy’s voice that defied comprehension – wait, Castiel knew what the problem was, his mouth had slipped and slid and he’d nearly let Jimmy escape, his lips only barely kissing the amazing tip of Jimmy’s perfect, gorgeous cock. Chuckling, Castiel slid his lips back around Jimmy, dragged his tongue over the vein that ran along the side of Jimmy’s cock, took Jimmy as deep as he had yet, and pumped Jimmy’s cock in his fist.

I can’t do it…yes, I can, I can, I—

“Brother, stop!”

Shock froze Castiel in place. Jimmy’s hands grabbed Castiel’s head, tangled in his hair, and tugged him free. Jimmy groaned and a glob of thick, bitter, gooey something hit Castiel’s tongue and he gagged.
Come. That’s Jimmy’s come.

It’s gross.

Whimpering and groaning, thrashing against the bedding, tangling Castiel up in the blanket, Jimmy came, semen splashing over Castiel’s lips, his neck, his cheeks. Dazed, shocked, struggling to get enough air, Castiel didn’t try to move; he let Jimmy hold him in place, let Jimmy come around him and over him, wondered in bemused confusion how he’d gotten to be nearly 30 without ever learning that semen was utterly and completely disgusting.

Maybe it wasn’t actually so bad…maybe I was just surprised…?

Certain it was the worst idea he’d had in days, Castiel flicked his tongue out and lapped up some of the come where it had pooled on his upper lip.

No, even when he was mentally prepared, Jimmy’s come was still revolting.

Jimmy burst into breathy, pleased laughter, fingers carding tender thanks through Castiel’s hair. Light played against Castiel’s eyelids, painted them pink, and he tentatively blinked; tears and sleep gunk and maybe semen caught in his eyelashes. Castiel had a hand raised to wipe them clear before he remembered that both his hands were coating in spit and worse. At some point, the blanket had been pulled away. Castiel hadn’t noticed. He still felt overheated, dazed, vertiginous from lack of air. Lying before him, Jimmy was an indistinct blur, black hair, pale skin, a white shirt, dark pools where his eyes should be, cock an out-of-focus blob caught on the waist band of Jimmy’s pants. Unthinkingly, Castiel flicked his tongue out to clear the liquid from his lips and grimaced as more bitterness overwhelmed his taste buds. Jimmy laughed harder, and…

…and Castiel had no idea what happened as the world spun. He was on his back, the bed bouncing beneath him. Jimmy was over him, around him, must have dived and tackled him but the movements had distorted to meaningless streaks and the fever that had Castiel enraptured made it impossible for him to focus, impossible for him to think. His skin scarce contained an inferno, heat so powerful that even the removal of the blanket hadn’t been enough to cool his sweat-coated flesh. Jimmy’s lips met Castiel’s, Jimmy’s tongue licked a messy streak over Castiel’s cheek, and with a shocked groan Castiel realized Jimmy was cleaning his own come off Castiel’s face.

“So hot, brother,” Jimmy growled.

“Yes,” Castiel managed, helpless, lost. He had no idea what was wrong with him. He was so hot he couldn’t breathe, so hot he couldn’t think, so hot, so hot, so—

Jimmy’s hand closed around Castiel’s dick.

With a howl, Castiel bucked into the touch and combusted, the heat instantly transforming into need beyond anything Castiel had experienced before.

“Jimmy!”

“I know, I know, I’ve been there,” Jimmy whispered reassuringly into Castiel’s ear.

Jimmy’s chillness surrounded Castiel’s bonfire, Jimmy’s weight over him grounded him, and Jimmy stroked his cock confidently, aggressively, and Castiel couldn’t keep himself from thrusting up into every touch, couldn’t imagine why he’d ever felt the need to keep himself from thrusting into every touch. Guttural sounds that might have been words leaked from him but he could think of nothing but chasing the next burst of bliss, understand nothing save that Jimmy was touching him and Jimmy wanted him and Jimmy was praising him and that he, Castiel, had used his mouth
to make Jimmy come.

Without Jimmy there surrounding him, reassuring him, touching him, Castiel would have flown apart into a million pieces, a billion billion component atoms. Jimmy’s weight shifted and panic seized Castiel. If Jimmy moved now…there were no words to tell Jimmy to stay, but Castiel flailed with arms that felt leaden yet disconnected from his body, wrapped them around Jimmy’s back and pulled his brother against him. All his awareness narrowed to Jimmy’s hand pumping his cock, Jimmy’s body pressed against him, and Jimmy’s lips sucking the semen from his neck.

Castiel thought his eyes were still open, but he wasn’t sure. His body was afire with need and heat and desire and the world whited out as if he were lost in the snow.

“Shh,” murmured Jimmy in his ear. “Shh, you’re okay. I’ve got you, Cassie. I’m not going anywhere. Shh…”

The reassurance was pleasant but Castiel felt so far away from himself, so far away from his brother, that he was confused. Only when he forced himself to focus did he realize that he was whispering, “don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t stop” repeatedly in a raspy voice unrecognizable as his own.

“I’m sorry,” he managed brokenly. He’d never have imagined it would be so hard to make himself stop talking. His lips wanted to move, wanted to plead, no matter how his mind attempted to instruct otherwise. Taking stock of himself, he found his chest yet heaving as he gasped for air, his heart yet pounding, his blood yet rushing through his ears, his hips yet working weakly up off the bed.

“You have no idea how incredible your passion is, do you?” said Jimmy, his weight shifting, something feather light brushing Castiel’s cheek.

*He’s not shifting, he’s shaking his head, and that’s his hair tickling me.*

“I’m nothing special,” Castiel tried to say, but it came out slurred into one meaningless word.

“You are,” Jimmy replied.

_Not meaningless. Even when I scarce know what I’m saying, Jimmy understands me._

*I used to think I couldn’t possibly love him more, but I do. More and more every day.*

_We can make this work. We have to make this work. I’m no longer sure who I would be without him, and I never want to be forced to find out._

“You’ve got no airs, Cassie,” continued Jimmy. “You’re so real. Yeah, you kinda…sorta…_really_…don’t know what you’re doing but you’re so sincere in your attempts, and you express everything you feel so openly. God, you’re gorgeous. I wish I could show you how you look when you’re losing your mind simply because I’m touching you. I wish you could hear what I hear when you beg for me. I used to dream…but this is better, and it gets better every time.”

Jimmy trailed off, and then mumbled into Castiel’s skin, “I never want anyone else to see you like this or hear you like this. I never want anyone else to touch you like I do. I never want to share. You’re mine, Cassie.”

“ ‘m not,” whispered Cassie.

*If I’m yours…when you get bored of me, what will happen to me then?*
I wish I could be yours, brother, but I don’t dare give myself over that completely.

There was a beat pause, and though Jimmy didn’t move, Castiel felt his brother withdrawing emotionally and it was agonizing. Something in him screamed to take it back, to say whatever vows he must to bring Jimmy back, to surrender himself completely to what they had together, but he held the words back.

Whatever we are to each other, I’m still mine. As bewitching as the idea of allowing myself to be claimed is…

…it’s dangerous, and frightening. I want to be his, yet, but I also want to be mine, need to stay mine.

“’m sorry,” added Castiel.

But I don’t take it back. We have to be realistic about this. We’ve always been close, overly close, and if we’re not careful we’ll lose what little division keeps us sane, lose that iota of separation that lets us function as separate people.

“You’re right,” mumbled Jimmy. “That was too far. I’m sorry.” Jimmy shifted, sat up, and Castiel tried and failed to muster the energy to stop him, the energy to move, the energy to protest. He needed to explain himself but he couldn’t escape the conviction that the sentiments that were so clear in his head would sound like gibberish if he attempted to say them aloud.

Every time I start to think that maybe we can make this work, I find some new way we’re doomed to fail.

No.

I find some new way that, by my behavior, I doom us to fail. It’s not Jimmy’s fault.

Now who’s got who on a pedestal?

“The washcloth is cold,” Jimmy said ruefully, holding up the terrycloth that Castiel had brought earlier. “And it soaked a wet spot through the mattress pad.” Castiel tried to roll to see what Jimmy meant but his foot caught in the elastic that normally helped the fitted sheet stretch over the bed and he gave up. The challenge of freeing himself was insurmountable. Jimmy glanced at him, quirked an eyebrow, and laughed. “Don’t worry, I’ll get a fresh one.”

Before Castiel could object or make a counter suggestion, Jimmy was off the bed and gone. Stretching languidly, Castiel blinked and watched the door through which Jimmy had vanished, thoughts muddled.

…but if he wants me…

…but would it be so bad if we…

…but what if he meets someone else…

…but what if I meet someone else…

…that will never happen…

A vision formed before Castiel’s bleary eyes, of a familiar form filling the doorway, tall, broad shouldered, skin tanned, brown hair streaked with blond, green eyes aglow.
Shocked, Castiel blinked and the fantasy vanished. It was a wrench to realize that Dean wasn’t actually there, horrible to remember that while Castiel lounged in bed, sated and happy, loved and in love, Dean was lost, alone and cold and hungry.

...maybe I already love someone else? Maybe that’s where my reticence comes from?

Tears pooled around the edges of Castiel’s eyelids and he blinked them away, opened his eyes to see Jimmy standing where he’d imagined Dean moments before. Jimmy’s pants hung low on his hips and his shirt clung to his chest and belly, belling and billowing with every breath. His hair was a disheveled mess, his blue eyes twinkled nearly as brightly as Dean’s green ones did, and his lips were quirked in a hesitant, uncertain smile that Castiel longed to kiss away. There must be something Castiel could say, some words that would dissipate the concern wrinkling Jimmy’s forehead.

I’m sure I love Jimmy.

It’s not possible to love more than one person.

Is it?

“Come on, Cas, I’ll clean you up,” said Jimmy, a heartbreaking note in his voice. Quick steps covered the scant distance from the door to the bed and wet heat wiped over Castiel’s crotch and belly, sponged over his neck and face, and finally cleared the last of the gummy mess from Castiel’s eyes so that he could see clearly.

Their gazes met.

“I love you, Jimmy.” Conviction buttressed the words, confidence heartened them, and Castiel had the gratification of watching Jimmy’s sad expression slip into wide-eyed wonder, confusion, and awe. Dropping to his knees beside the bed, Jimmy threw the washcloth aside and brought their mouths together. Castiel’s eyes slipped shut. Though Jimmy said nothing aloud, his kiss communicated the world. There was no doubt in Jimmy’s kiss, no hesitation.

One kiss turned into many, the snow made a soft whispering swish as it fell against the windows, and Jimmy and Castiel didn’t get out of bed all day.
“Mmm, smells good,” murmured Jimmy, nuzzling at Castiel’s neck. The crock pot had been running for six hours. The kitchen was redolent with the aroma of cooking beef roast, earthy mushrooms and potatoes, and an array of herbs that Castiel had added to the stew at random.

“It’s not ready yet,” Castiel scolded his brother. Jimmy’s hands curled around Castiel’s waist, fingertips kneading at Castiel’s flesh. Embarrassment and desire burgeoned simultaneously. They stood in the kitchen, Castiel leaning over the sink as he washed dishes, only a lacy white curtain over a window facing the road outside to hide them the gazes of anyone driving by.

“How long?” Jimmy mouthed the words as wet kisses on Castiel’s neck. Nervous, Castiel glanced at the window and caught sight of his red-cheeked reflection.

“Two hours…” Castiel breathed. Jimmy’s erection pressed against Castiel’s butt, and despite himself, he wiggled backwards against his brother, his own cock thickening with interest.

“Plenty of time,” said Jimmy, snuffling at Castiel’s hair. His hands slipped beneath Castiel’s shirt and kneaded up his front; he stopped with his fingers curled over the gentle rising curve of Castiel’s breasts, fingers teasing brushes over Castiel’s nipples. A hitched noise escaped Castiel.

“Ya know, the way that fine ass of yours is rubbin’ against my cock makes me think all kinds of naughty things…” Jimmy pressed his hips against Castiel’s ass, and pleasure and disgust warred in Castiel’s head. His erection flag, and he shook his head a vehement no.

“Guess I shouldn’t push?” sighed Jimmy.

Though his tone was regretful, he shoved his hips playfully against Castiel again. Anal play was off the table; Castiel was getting better at fighting the demons that said that having a dick in his mouth was disgusting, but the thought of a touch to his anus, of the insertion of something into him, or of inserting any part of himself into Jimmy’s anus, was nauseating. Flipping the sink water off, Castiel swallowed hard against rising bile.

“Jimmy…”

“Sorry, Cas,” said Jimmy, sounding truly contrite this time. “How about this instead…”

Sliding his hands back down Castiel’s torso, Jimmy tugged the elastic of Castiel’s sweat pants down, releasing the waistband to snap against Castiel’s thighs, exposing Castiel’s ass and cock. Castiel gripped the counter surrounding the sink, pleasurable anticipation building again. Jimmy might push boundaries but he’d never done anything Castiel had asked him not to, not even when Castiel thought Jimmy completely lost in passion. Castiel trusted his brother implicitly, so he trusted when Jimmy reached around Castiel and took up the plastic container of bright pink dish soap, cupped one palm, poured a generous amount into it, and drew his hands back. Murmuring encouragement in Castiel’s ear, Jimmy smeared the thick soap between Castiel’s thighs. There was a thwap-snap sound of elastic, and Jimmy slid his cock between Castiel’s legs, rubbing it flush with Castiel’s perineum, bumping Castiel’s balls as he thrust.

“How about this instead…”

“Okay?” asked Jimmy, already breathless.

“Okay,” Castiel agreed. They’d talked about this previously – Jimmy said it was called intercrural sex – and Castiel had given Jimmy the green light.

With a grateful, satisfied noise, Jimmy rocked back, rocked forward, thrust between Castiel’s legs,
and to Castiel’s surprise pleasure flared over his vision, sensitive nerves in the skin between his anus and his testicles going molten. His balls jostled and bounced and tightened and his cock hardened. Wrapping his arms around Castiel’s chest, bending Castiel over the kitchen counter, Jimmy thrust again, again, finding a rhythm, grunting and murmuring his approval.

“Good…feels good…so good, Cassie, so…”

To Castiel’s amazement, it did feel good. Not orgasm-inducing, but when they’d talked about this as an intercourse option Castiel had assumed it would mostly be for Jimmy’s pleasure – that Castiel would be a willing receptacle but not an active participant. Jimmy had suggested Castiel try it, too, but Castiel wasn’t up for trying; somehow, the idea of thrusting against his brother, pseudo-thrusting into his brother, was a turn off, but being thrust against struck him as neutral.

It wasn’t neutral.

Every thrust rubbed hard, hot erection over Castiel’s inner thighs and ass. Every thrust smeared dish soap sticky on his skin, a thick bead oozing cool distraction down his leg. Every thrust knocked into Castiel’s balls, burst pleasure behind Castiel’s eyes. Every thrust brushed Castiel’s cock against the cabinets beneath the sink. Every thrust felt good, left Castiel aching for more. Castiel’s pleasure intensified.

“Please…”

Castiel felt amazing but he ached for more, ached for further touch, ached for harder pressure against his perineum. Jimmy had kissed him there before, rubbed him there before, explained that the thin layer of skin and flesh and muscle were all that separated Jimmy’s rough touch from Castiel’s prostate – explained that if Jimmy slipped a finger into Castiel’s butt, it’d feel even better – but before, it had never felt this intense and Castiel’s disgust had outweighed his curiosity. As the pleasure built and built, as the need for something more, something undefinable, grew, Castiel understood for the first time why he might want something to be pushed into him.

“So hot…” Jimmy moaned, jerking Castiel back against him.

Jimmy’s soap-slick palm wrapped around Castiel’s dick and the desire and need that Castiel had been unable to give a name to solidified, focused, as Jimmy stroked him and bliss surged through
him. Seconds might have slid into minutes might have slid into hours as they rocked together, Castiel thrusting back against his brother, thrusting forward into Jimmy’s hand, ecstasy growing and growing only to suddenly snap. With a ragged cry, Castiel climaxed, his come streaking wet lines down the kitchen fixtures, his legs clenching around Jimmy’s dick. Incoherent words choked guttural in Jimmy’s throat, curses and praise mingling together, and then Jimmy shoved Castiel forward so hard that the edge of the counter dug painfully into Castiel’s pelvis. Jimmy thrust desperately, erratically, hot moisture splashing Castiel’s balls and dangling cock.

Breathing hard, they stood frozen in tableau.

Jimmy shattered the silence. “That was good?” He was adorably nervous, panting.

Opening his eyes, Castiel caught a glimpse of another car going by and his knees gave out as ugly shame rose within him. He slumped against the counter and lay his head on the cool metal of the sink. Jimmy’s cock slid free with a wet sound, and come dripped plop, plop, plop onto the linoleum floor.

“It was good,” Castiel agreed, nodding.

_I have nothing to be ashamed of. This is our house. We are consenting adults. There’s nothing inherently wrong with doing something that brings us pleasure and hurts no one. I stopped believing in divine retribution for my sins when I saw how many bad people prospered, how many good people suffered, in the places where we lived. If we’re gay, if we’re brothers, it doesn’t matter._

A ding sounded loud throughout the house.

Someone was ringing the doorbell.

Castiel froze, panic gripping his chest.

“IT’s okay, Cassie,” Jimmy promised, running a reassuring hand down the curve of Castiel’s back. “It’s okay, you just…you take a minute. Take as long as you need. I’m good. I’ll go see what’s going on, okay?”

It was all Castiel could do to nod agreement. Tears of shame pooled in his eyes. Only his grip on the counter kept him upright; his legs shook, scarce able to support him even in a squat. He couldn’t open his eyes, couldn’t watch Jimmy leave, and had only the click of the catch lock to reassure him that Jimmy had closed the kitchen door. Events in the hallway came to him muffled as he tried to muster the willpower to move, to clean up the mess they’d made, to pull up his pants and play at being social with whoever had come to see them.

“You the Shurley boys I’ve heard so much ‘bout?” asked an unfamiliar, no-nonsense female voice.

_Breathe, Castiel. She doesn’t know. She’ll never know anything perverted happened if we don’t tell her._

_Damn it, why do I persist in thinking that what we do together is sick? It’s not. I know it’s not. But when I’m not concentrating on reassuring myself, my automatic reaction is…_

Shaking the thought away, Castiel grabbed the dish towel and used it to sponge up the mess. Jimmy replied to the woman, the low hum of his voice obvious though his words were indistinct. At least their lubricant was soap; despite the puddles of gooey come, cleaning up most of the mess left the cabinet front and floor cleaner than they’d been before Castiel and Jimmy had sex in the kitchen.
Oh God, we had sex in the kitchen...I’m going to have to disinfect everything...I chop vegetables on this counter...use the dishes in the sink...we eat at the table and now it’s been exposed to our butts and our cocks and...

...and there is nothing inherently dirty about our butts or our cocks.

We both showered like three hours ago. We regularly launder out clothes. We wipe after using the bathroom. Our bodies aren’t dirty, they’re just bodies.

I don’t think Jimmy is dirty.

I think I’m dirty, and I always have.

I’m not. The way I am is fine.

“...didn’t come visit me?”

I’m not dirty. The way I am is fine.

Forcing himself to take slow, calming breaths, repeating the mantra in his head, Castiel finished cleaning up while half-listening to the conversation from the hallway. The longer Castiel took, the softer the talk became until he could scarce hear. There was no way he was going to emerge and introduce himself to their visitor while he still felt weak-kneed, still felt the gooeyness of soap between his legs. When he was done, when he felt steady, when he felt like maybe, just possibly, he wasn’t disgusting, hadn’t dragged Jimmy down to hell with him, he took one final deep breath and headed out.

I’m not dirty.

She doesn’t know anything we’ve done behind closed doors.

If she did—

No. I still wouldn’t be dirty.

She’d be wrong if she judged us for physically enjoying each other’s company. We’ve done nothing wrong.

We’re not dirty.

The way we are is fine.

Jimmy and the stranger sat in the living room across the hall from the kitchen. The room was homey, with a small, plush couch beside an armchair done in different upholstery and a dark-finished wood coffee table in a rustic style centered on an oval rag-woven area rug. A TV they rarely used sat on a low entertainment center in pale fiberboard that clashed with the table. Jimmy sat in the armchair, apparently at ease, but Castiel recognized the signs of tension and uncertainty: the tightness of Jimmy’s shoulder, the nervous jitter of his foot, the lack of ease in how he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. The woman sat on the couch, brown hair smooth over her forehead, expression neutral. She wore a uniform Castiel didn’t recognize, a dark green coat with an emblem over the breast with flaps covering the thighs of her matching pants. She span a knit hat idly in her hands. Castiel wished he knew her well enough to read her as Castiel read his brother. He couldn’t guess if she was calm or tense, suspicious or nervous, friendly or hostile.

“Hey, Cassie, this is Ranger Mills—”
A snort interrupted Jimmy. “Call me Jody,” interjected Mrs. Mills, a wry smile softening her expression and reassuring Castiel that they weren’t in trouble.

“Jody, this is my brother, Castiel,” Jimmy finished, gesturing between them. Castiel crossed to Mrs. Mills, shook her hand, then stood back awkwardly. With Jimmy in the armchair and Mrs. Mills on the couch, he wasn’t sure where to sit, so he settled back on his heels before the TV.

*Why does that name sound familiar?*

“Mrs. Mills,” said Castiel politely.

*I mean, obviously I’ve heard it, I helped address the barbeque invitations, but it’s more than that.*

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Shurley.” Mrs. Mills’ smile broadened, giving her a motherly appearance, bringing a lovely twinkle to her eyes. “As I mentioned to your brother, I’m surprised you boys haven’t been ‘round to see me. I was sorry I couldn’t make it to the barbeque, but holiday weekends are busy times in the Parks service. I figured with you makin’ house calls every which way I’d meet ya but then you never came knocking.”

“After our last visit, we, um…we thought better of continuing to intrude on our neighbor’s privacy,” said Jimmy tactfully. Mrs. Mills’ smile spread into a knowing grin.

“The Bender family has that effect on people,” she said. Castiel nodded rueful agreement. “Wish you’d come to me first. My family’s lived on this mountains since my folks were young, and I’ve been a public servant maintaining the State Forest since around when you boys were born. I know pretty much everyone ‘round these parts. Pa Bender’s grandparents were trouble, and his parents were trouble, and he’s trouble, and he’s raising those kids of his to be trouble, too. You’d be wise to stay out of their way.”

*It always comes back to the Benders.*

“They creeped the sh…crap…outta me.” There was an unspoken ‘ma’am’ at the end of Jimmy’s sentence, and Mrs. Mills quirked a shrewd eyebrow at him.


“Jody,” they dutifully echoed.

*Why have I heard that name before?*

*Did someone talk about her at the barbeque?*

“Good. And yeah, the Benders scare the shit outta me too,” said Jody.

*I don’t think that’s it…*

“Pa seems to have takin’ a shine to you boys,” she continued.

*…why can’t I remember…*

“Said you’re good, God-fearing kids, brought up proper. Gave me the heebie jeebies, the way he smiled ‘bout it. Stay away from the Benders, boys. They’re dangerous.”

*…that’s exactly what Dean said about them…*

_Dean!_
“You know Dean!” Castiel exclaimed, then immediately wished he’d kept his mouth shut. Jimmy turned to look at him, and for the first time since he’d arrived in the room, Mrs. Mills looked at him, really looked at him, and her eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, I know Dean – knew both the Winchester boys, and their mom, ‘fore she passed,” she said slowly. “Dean’s not much for new folk, though, ‘specially not after what happened to Sam, so I’m damn surprised you know Dean.”

“I don’t,” Jimmy supplied. “He won’t even come in the house, much less agree to meet me. I was worried he was some crazy stalker or something…?”

“What, Dean?” scoffed Mrs. Mills. “You think that too, Castiel?” The unusual name was awkward in her mouth, her gaze piercing.

“Cas, please,” he mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Nevermind, I…no, I don’t think Dean’s a stalker, but I’m worried about him,” Castiel said more confidently. “I don’t know where he lives or how he takes care of himself. Heck, I didn’t even know his last name until you said it just now. Last time I saw him, he looked bad – unwell. I offered him help, gave him some winter gear, but he said he’d be fine and I haven’t seen him since. That was about a month ago.”

“Well, at least you boys’ve got some sense of self-preservation.” Mrs. Mills rolled her eyes. “If you were stupid enough to go visit the Benders at their house but thought Dean, of all people on this mountain, was dangerous, I’d be tellin’ you to pack your boxes and head back to wherever you came from, cause this ain’t the place for you.”

“Is Dean alright?” asked Castiel, breathless, embarrassed to be breathless. Jimmy stared at him, expression unreadable even to Castiel’s practiced eye.

“Winters are tough for folks like him,” Mrs. Mills said with a shrug. “He’s gotten through every other winter fine, I’m sure he’ll be good.”

“Folks like him?” Jimmy asked suspiciously.

“If he hasn’t told you, ain’t my place to say,” said Mrs. Mills. “You boys need to spend less time worrying about all of us ‘round you and more time seeing to you and yours. Take care of this house, take care of the grounds, and everything’ll work out a-okay.”

The willow trees...
The Benders...
Hunting...
Everyone warns us away from the Bender family, every single one...
What if...

“Mrs. Mills – sorry, Jody…” He trailed off, realizing belatedly that Jimmy had been talking. Jimmy snapped his mouth shut and shot Castiel a sour look. “I’m sorry,” he repeated, “but…” Maybe I shouldn’t say anything. Maybe I shouldn’t ask. Maybe…but… “Did the Benders kill Sam?”
A gust of wind whistled outside. The crock pot burbled. Whatever had been clicking outside and driving Castiel nuts clicked again. The silence in the room made even the softest sound deafening.

“What makes you think that?” asked Mrs. Mills finally.

“I don’t…I don’t know…” Castiel stammered. Was there any way he could explain his thought process that didn’t sound insane? Dean seems really attached to the willow tree out back and he grieves over that stump like most people grieve over a casket and the Benders cut the tree down and they told me they’ll hunt anything and I don’t know why all of that seems related to me but it does. I can’t escape the feeling it’s all linked, and so… “Lots of little things, I guess.”

“Well, if you ever find some proof to back up those lots of little things, you come right to me, ya hear? I wasn’t able to get the authorities to take Sam’s disappearance seriously – not for lack of trying, mind – but when there’s no body, cops in these parts are inclined to say there’s been no crime. When there is a body, the cops are inclined to say it was a hiking accident, or bears, or a misfire, or any of a dozen bullshit excuses rather than admit we have a serious problem up here – rather than point fingers when there’s no evidence. With the trail passin’ through we always have new faces, and if one or two disappear each year, well, maybe they shouldn’t’a gone out in a storm, maybe they shouldn’t’a camped when the temperature dipped below freezing, maybe they shoulda stuck to the trail instead of gettin’ nosy – always an excuse, always the victim’s fault, and none to say otherwise. If Bobby were still around, he’d a looked into it, but he’s ten years dead and we’re all worse off for it. God I miss that bastard. Current Sheriff ain’t worth a damn.”


“Robert,” mimicked Mrs. Mills, shaking her head. “Man, if he coulda heard you say that, he’d’a given you the rough side of his tongue. Bobby was Sheriff for decades, well liked, a good man, and he loved Sam and Dean like they were his own sons. Woulda broken his heart to know that Sam was killed and no one even gave enough of a damn to investigate.”

“Why not?” Castiel said.

“Take it Dean’s not told you much about himself?” she countered. Castiel shook his head. “Well, it’s not my place to say. We all got secrets up here – you too, I’d wager – and it’s for no one to out someone else. If Dean wants you to know…well, you ask him next time you see him. Heck, maybe he’ll even tell you. But listen, don’t you two go all Hardy Boys ‘bout this. If Dean likes you, then you’re good folk – I don’t need more proof than that. He’s already had a lifetime of grief. Don’t bring trouble down on your heads and cause him more.” Castiel and Jimmy exchanged a look, Jimmy opened his mouth to reply, and Mrs. Mills stared him down and said, “Something smells mighty good – what’s in the oven?”

“Cassie’s a great cook,” said Jimmy, resigned to the topic change. “Crock pot roast is one of his specialties. Maybe you’d join us for dinner?”

Though Castiel longed to continue speaking of Dean, longed to find out more about Dean’s past and about Mrs. Mills’ suspicions about the Benders, he forced himself to accept that Mrs. Mills’ had put the kybosh on the topic. Mrs. Mills asked Castiel about his recipe, Jimmy suggested they’d be baking some Texas Toast to go with the meal, and before Castiel knew it they had dinner company and, he suspected, a new friend. Mrs. Mills was down to earth, interesting, and funny. She knew loads about the local area and shared Castiel’s obsession with the plants and wildlife. After several hours in her company, Castiel thought she might know even more about invasive species than Dean did. No further mention was made of the dangers of life on the mountain, and Castiel thought the topic forgotten until they were seeing Mrs. Mills out and she grew unexpectedly solemn.
“I like you boys,” she said, honest, direct, guileless. “I can see why Dean decided to trust you. He hated the previous owners – it was mutual, really – and he deserved the house be in the hands of folks like you. So you remember what I said – look out for yourselves. Be careful. Winters are damn harsh in the heights, and opening your door to strangers can get you in loads of trouble. Dean’s okay, and I’m okay, but some?” She shook her head. “Anyway, sounds like you two don’t have any family hereabouts…?” She waited for them to nod agreement, then said, “Every year I make Thanksgiving dinner. Used to do it for my boy and my husband, but they’re gone now. These days, I cook for the other rangers and a few townsfolk who come, but you’d be welcome, if you’d like a place to go.”

“Thank you,” said Jimmy, Castiel murmuring the same. “We don’t want to be a bother.”

Mrs. Mills’ had this facial expression where she’d raise an eyebrow and twist her lips and somehow convey an ocean’s worth of disdain and sarcasm – the kind of look a mother would give a recalcitrant teenager, a kinder mirror of the look that Naomi had given Castiel whenever he pursued the art that she found so foolish.

“I’ll see ya Thursday night,” she said after several moments of measured silence, standing with a hand on the front door. “And you call me if the Benders, or anyone else, give you any trouble. Any friend of Dean’s is a friend of mine.” She inclined her head politely and ducked out into the night, pulling the door shut behind her.

“Well, that was interesting,” said Jimmy.

“I’m worried about Dean,” Castiel replied with a sad sigh.

“Me too, brother. Me too.”
“Ugh, I hate to ask, but – what’s that supposed to be?” Jimmy said, pointing at what Castiel had intended to be a pile of cut firewood. “Is it…a cabin? A shed? What’s it doing in the kids’ backyard?” Castiel sighed, massaging his temples with the thumb and forefinger of one hand. Their agent had given her stamp of approval to one of the concepts they’d sent – a series of four short books, one for each season, with an emphasis on color – and after doing a set of storyboards, Castiel had been pouring over the artwork for days. It was only mid-morning, but he was exhausted; he’d been up until nearly dawn finishing this piece, so late that he’d gone to his room and slept alone in his cold, lonely bed rather than disturb Jimmy, and now…

“Fuck,” he muttered. Jimmy started, so shocked he dropped his pen. “You’re right,” Castiel
continued with a sigh. “It’s supposed to be a wood pile but it mostly looks like a mound of shit.” Bending down to pick up his pen, Jimmy started again and bumped his head on Castiel’s stool. “I guess I hit the point where I wanted to be done more than I wanted to do a good job. I just…look, you’ve got your own stuff to do. Gimme a few hours, I’ll sketch out something new and show it to you before I waste 6 hours painting.” Straightening, Jimmy looked warily at Castiel. “What?”

“Are you okay, Cas?” asked Jimmy.

“Just peachy,” Castiel replied in clipped tones. “I love making crappy art. It’s my fave. I…I heart it, isn’t that what you said the other day when you couldn’t find a word to rhyme with ‘autumn’ and the rhyming dictionary nothing but variations of the word ‘bottom?’”

“I still think I could write one hell of a porno poem out of those suggested rhymes,” agreed Jimmy with a shrug and a wry nod of his head. “‘Swat him’ was also on the list – I was thinking a limerick, like,

“There’s nothing like sex in the autumn –
When you sought him, you got him, you swat him –
Though the days may be cold
You’ll never get old
Fingering the fuck out of his foggy bottom.

“What even is a foggy bottom? And don’t think I didn’t notice you trying to change the subject.” Jimmy turned the conclusion into a reprimand, wagging a finger at Castiel like their mother used to do when Castiel was naughty.

But that’s just the thing, right? I’m naughty all the time now. If I’d been able to concentrate last night I’d not have painted garbage, but instead all I could think about was Jimmy...

…and Dean...

…and how much I’d rather be warm in bed with Jimmy's arms around me...

…and how much I’d rather be painting Dean, snug and warm, face flushed with health and muscles corded as he tended the garden...

…and I’m ashamed to have become a man who obsesses about sex when there’s work to be done.

Since when did thinking about Dean have anything to do with obsessing about sex?

“I could swear there was a time when you talked to me, Cassie,” Jimmy said, sighing heavily. Castiel blinked away his distraction and found piercing, assessing blue eyes watching him. Coloring, he looked away. “But when I try to remember when that was, I draw a blank. Maybe it was in my head. Maybe there never was more to our relationship than that we happened to be born at the same time, that we were dragged around the world together, and that we spent 15 years awkwardly fantasizing about each other.”

Maybe. Maybe that’s all we were ever to each other.

“It was in my head, too,” whispered Castiel. “It’s all in my head.”

“What’s in your head?” Conflicting emotions tinged Jimmy’s words; they were a demand, a
supplication, a resigned request that Jimmy never believed Castiel would honor.

I don’t want to lose this.

I don’t want to be the reason this doesn’t work.

I don’t even know what ‘this’ is, or what I mean when I think about ‘this.’

But I know it’s failing. It’s been failing since day one. It’s failing because of me.

Then again…Jimmy didn’t ask.

Maybe it’s failing because of both of us.

Nodding to himself, agreeing with himself, Castiel dropped his pencil onto the shelf beneath his easel and walked toward the door to his studio.

“Cassie!”

I’m so scared.

“If you walk out now…I’ll…I’ll…”

What would happen if I walked out now?

“…you can’t just ignore me like this!”

I’m not ignoring you. I hear every word you say, and am reminded with every one how unworthy I am.

Castiel paused in the doorway. “I can’t do this in here. I’m…I’m not sure I can do this. But I want to.”

“What’s this, Cas?” demanded Jimmy. The softness was gone from his voice; there was only anger, distress, and fractured patience.

“Don’t you ever feel that this is all wrong?” Castiel asked.

A hand landed on Castiel’s shoulder. Castiel flinched and imagined – surely invented – the wounded noise that Jimmy made as his hand fell away.

“Being with you is like a fucking rollercoaster, Cas, like living in that crappy shack we had in Cambodia where on any given day it was anyone’s guess if the water would run hot or cold. You gotta tell me clearly what you mean, or we gotta go back to sleeping in separate beds, gotta go back to…to being brothers, only being brothers. We can do that, you know. If this isn’t what you want. If I pushed you somewhere you don’t want to be. If you’re just doing this because you think I want to. If—”

“No!” Castiel interrupted more harshly than he meant to. “You’re not the problem, Jimmy. You’ve never been the problem. I’m just…”

Twisted.

Disgusting.

Sick.
Dysfunctional.

Damned.

Jimmy’s hand brushed over his skin again and Castiel stepped away. He didn’t deserve Jimmy’s tenderness or concern, not when he couldn’t meet the most basic requirement of being in a relationship – regardless of the nature of that relationship – and communicate what was troubling him.

“Castiel…”

The use of his full name was like a blow, even though Jimmy’s voice was rife with sympathy and worry instead of the anger that Castiel had earned in spades.

*How will you feel when you know how gross I think I am, when you realize how that reflects back on you? We’re identical, we’ve always been identical, will always be identical, and so if I’m gross, that means you’re…*

“I feel…I feel broken, Jimmy,” Castiel confessed.

“But what does that mean?” asked Jimmy.

Castiel shook his head. Jimmy’s presence was heavy behind him. Castiel’s body felt like a prison. Standing was too difficult. Fatigue and fear throbbed pain behind his eyes, and Castiel had to move, had to escape. Taking one tentative step, than another, he navigated the narrow hallways of the second floor to his bedroom and flopped, face down, on the bed he’d not bothered to make. Creaks and squeaks and rustles were the only evidence that Jimmy followed him.

Outside, the wind made the loose something clatter.

Despite the weather sealant that they’d heat-sealed to the window, a thread of chill air curled and twisted through the room like smoke dissipating from a lit cigarette.

“All my hang ups…” Castiel started and trailed off. His voice was muffled by his quilt. Squeezing his eyes shut against a film of tears, he listened to the rush of air outside, listened to the quiet puff and gust of Jimmy’s breathing. “I guess I’ve talked about it a little. When I said I wasn’t comfortable with blow jobs. When I said I didn’t want you to touch my anus, and that I wasn’t comfortable touching your anus.” Even talking about his butt made Castiel feel disgusting. Nausea twisted his stomach, and he tried to dissipate his tension by scrunching his fingers in the blanket; his thumb went through a section of loose stitching with a soft tearing sound, and Castiel sighed.

*I ruin everything I touch. I can’t even paint a goddamn wood pile correctly. A first year art student can draw fucking wood.*

“But it’s not merely that they make me uncomfortable.” Castiel forced himself to continue, wondering if Jimmy was really there. “Nor is it a matter of inexperience, nor simply my embarrassment at my virgin ineptitude.” Maybe Castiel had imagined that his brother had followed him, that his brother hadn’t given up on him already. Maybe Castiel was alone.

*Even if I’m alone, I need to say these things. If I say them aloud once, even if he doesn’t hear me now, maybe someday I’ll be able to say them again when he’s present.*

*I hope he didn’t follow me.*

“They make me feel filthy. I never believed what our parents said about homosexuality, what they
said about abstinence and sin and sex, but I heard it all, and it’s in my head, and I can’t get it out. Even when I masturbate I feel guilty, and it’s not just because I think about you, it’s because I’m touching myself for no purpose other than to give myself base, carnal animal satisfaction. I should be bigger than that. I should be able to resist temptations of the flesh. That’s what a good son would do, right? That’s what they always said, and I know it’s bull, and I’ve gotten better over the years but since we—” Are you there, Jimmy? Are you with me? “—since we started…” If he’s there, he knows what I mean, and if he’s not, there’s no point in saying it. “…since we started, it’s been worse, much worse. How much I want to be near you makes me sick, Jimmy. How much I want you to touch me terrifies me.”

“You’re panicking,” said Jimmy, tone unreadable.

You really are there.

Grief swamped Castiel, shocked him, and he choked a sob into the blanket, clenching his hands into fists. Another tear opened – the quilt was handmade and old, a hand-me-down salvaged from their parents’ estate – and Castiel’s guilt increased, bound his throat, clouded his mind.

If they knew what we were doing...

If...

“Yeah, I guess I am,” Castiel admitted, hiccoughing. “I, um…I actually think I…kinda get off…on…I mean, I like how guilty I feel. I like how wrong what we’re doing is…how humiliating it is…”

“Wow,” said Jimmy.

Castiel had no idea how to read Jimmy’s inflection.

Castiel had no idea what wow meant.

Oh, no, you know exactly what ‘wow’ means. Finally, you’ve shocked your brother. Naïve, virginal, clueless, there was nothing sexual that you could do to surprise him, but telling him how sick you are? He’s never going to look at you the same way again.

“Cassie…may I…” Jimmy huffed out a breath. “May I come over there? May I touch you?”

Castiel shook his head.

“Please – words,” begged Jimmy. “I can’t read your mind. I wish I could but…”

No, you don’t. You don’t want to know how silly what I’m thinking is.

“Don’t, Jimmy…we shouldn’t…”

“‘Shouldn’t?’” Jimmy snorted. “You know that’s bullshit, right? You—”

“No,” Castiel interrupted. “No pressure, Jimmy. No remonstrance. Of course I know I’m being ridiculous. Why do you think I haven’t said anything? There’s nothing wrong with being gay. There’s nothing wrong with enjoying sex. There’s nothing disgusting about a penis or a vagina or a mouth or an anus. Heck, when I let myself think about it, really think about it, I don’t even think there’s anything objectively wrong with you and I…with us…and we’re brothers…but why is incest taboo? Because of unequal power dynamics? Sure, if we were father and son or older and younger siblings, but we’re the same age! Because of the risk of recessive gene combinations causing
diseases in children? Yeah, we’re going to have so many children, that’s a real concern. Because God said it’s wrong? How long as it been since either of us believed in God? And I know all of that but I still can’t stop thinking about how wrong what we’re doing is. Every time it feels good, I feel worse. I can’t keep doing this.”

“We can stop if you want,” suggested Jimmy forlornly.

“That’s not what I want,” Castiel shouted. Energy surged through him, pounded pain behind his eyes, and he pushed himself off the bed and rounded on Jimmy. “I want you!” Jimmy’s eyes were wide and fearful, silent tears making damp trails down his cheeks. Castiel’s guilt surged. I’m hurting him. My indecision, my uncertainty, my encyclopedia of issues, all of it was supposed to be directed internally but it’s rebounding out to hurt him, because he’s my twin, because I can’t figure out how to cope with my deviance on my own as I ought to. “I can’t keep feeling so shitty about it – about us – all the time. I…I…”

Breathing hard, Castiel dropped back onto the bed. Watching Jimmy’s reactions was unbearable, like looking in a fractured mirror and seeing the person Castiel should be, seeing the poise and equanimity he never dared hope to achieve.

“I need help, Jimmy,” Castiel whispered, pressing his palms hard against his eyelids. Blobs of light spawned and faded from his vision, crinkling and searing black around the edges as they dimmed.

“Then we’ll get you help,” Jimmy replied.

Just that simple.

Startled, Castiel sat up, trying to blink away the spots still dancing in his eyes, distorting the room, distending Jimmy. “I thought you’d offer to help…”

“Is that what you want?” Jimmy asked. Castiel shook his head, not because the answer was no, but because he had no idea. If Jimmy offered to help, Castiel would say no, because he couldn’t be an imposition, because it wasn’t fair to expect Jimmy to listen to the insanity on constant parade in his head, because it had taken him months to find the courage to talk to Jimmy about this once, and the prospect of ever having to find the nerve to open up about it to Jimmy again made his throat clench in terror.

“Good,” Jimmy said, “cause there’s no way in fuck-all I’m playing therapist. I want to be your brother, Cassie. I want to be your boyfriend. I want to be your lover. I want to be your support. But I’m not a doctor, and this internalized homophobia and sex aversion you’re spewing is way out of my paygrade. I’d do anything to help you, because I love you – like, really, seriously, out of my damn mind adore you – but I know what I can’t do. I can’t be your main go-to as you work through this. That’s a job for a doctor.”

“A…a doctor?” asked Castiel, the word somehow wondrous and new in his mouth.

Well, I do keep saying I’m sick…

…that’s not exactly what I had in mind, but…

“It’ll be hard to find a specialist ‘round here, but there might be someone in Plattsburgh, or Burlington, or, heck, I dunno, Montreal – your passport’s up-to-date, right? We’ll figure something out. If that’s what you want,” Jimmy added as a sincere afterthought.

Therapists are bunk. I know all about conversion therapy, all about…
…stop believing the things Naomi and Chuck said when you know they’re not true. That’s not what Jimmy means, and therapy and medication help a lot of people suffering from mental illnesses.

*Is this a mental illness?*

Whether it is or not, if nothing changes, I’ll lose Jimmy. I’d do anything for my brother, anything to protect him, and I know, without the shadow of a doubt, that if I continue on this course I will lose him, and hurt him a lot in the process.

*Talking to a doctor won’t make things worse, at least…*

*Come now, Castiel, be honest with yourself. Stirring up this morass? Having someone say ‘you’re right, you’re filthy?’ Could make things a heck of a lot worse.*

*But Jimmy is worth the risk.*

“I think…yeah,” said Castiel, nodding. “Let’s do that. You’ll…you’ll help me find someone?”

“Of course I will,” Jimmy replied with a warm, tearful smile. Tentatively, Castiel smiled back and realized belatedly he was crying too. The need to feel Jimmy’s physical presence as hot, solid reassurance was overpowering, and Castiel held out his arms in invitation. “Words, brother,” Jimmy scolded.

“Kiss me?” asked Castiel timidly.

Jimmy laughed, crossed to him, dropped to a squat, cupped Castiel’s cheek, kissed him fleetingly, gently.

“That I can do,” Jimmy murmured. “As often as you want.”

Leaning forward, Castiel kissed Jimmy again, pressed in hard, flicked his tongue against Jimmy’s lips and teased into Jimmy’s mouth. A familiar flutter of tension in his chest tightened and tightened; Castiel had scarce noticed it before but, hyper-aware of Jimmy beside him, finally open to the concerns he’d tried and failed to repress for so long, Castiel realized he’d felt the same quiver of fear every time they’d initiated intimacy. Dissipating the sick feeling was as easy as melting into the kiss, melting in to Jimmy’s acceptance and affection.

*Again and again, you save me. What would I do without you?*

Castiel kissed his brother, kissed him and kissed him and for once the only words in his head were affection, gratefulness, respect, and adoration.

Castiel was **happy**.

*Now I just have to figure out how to hold on to this feeling when I’m not in his arms…*

“So I hear that you feel dirty,” Jimmy murmured sultry in Castiel’s ear, growling the last word in a way that would have been ridiculous if Castiel wasn’t already so turned on. “Let’s fix that, shall we?”

Nodding fervently, Castiel leaned back against the shower tiles, cold compared to the hot water sluicing over his front. Jimmy pressed into him, bit and sucked hot kisses into Castiel’s neck, his
shoulder, his chest. The winter had been frigid, two feet of snow already accumulated, and there was a storm forecast for the weekend that, if it proved as heavy as predicted, would snow them in for at least a few days. After the success of the Thanksgiving meal, Jody had invited Castiel and Jimmy to Christmas, too, but they’d demurred, citing a desire for quiet family time.

It was Christmas Eve.

Neither brother expected to sleep.

They’d laid out pillows before the tree, atop blankets layered so thick on the hard floor that they’d be warm and snug and cradled and protected, hot in each other’s embrace.

No one was going to see them the next day or for days afterwards. No one would know that Castiel’s neck was painted with bruises. No one would wonder who’d marked him. The whisper of shame that Castiel felt simmered low enough to be a turn on – the knowledge that he could get caught alluring, the knowledge that he definitely wouldn’t actually get caught an essential source of security. He’d only spoken with Dr. Moseley – Missouri – three times, twice by phone given the distance to her office in Saratoga – but already her voice frequently supplanted the one in his head that had whispered poison. She drowned out his parent’s words, buttressed his intellectual rebuttals to the lies underpinning his knee-jerk negative reactions.

He was allowed to enjoy Jimmy’s mouth sucking at his nipple.

He was allowed to run his hands through Jimmy’s sopping hair.

He was allowed to leak needy noises to echo dully in the steamy bathroom.

He was allowed to urge Jimmy’s head down, to hitch his hips up.

He was allowed this bliss, not because Dr. Moseley said he could, not because Jimmy said he could – though that was obviously a factor – but because Castiel said he could.

Castiel was not dirty.

Castiel was not sick.

Castiel was not broken.

Castiel wasn’t sure he believed the mantras he repeated in his head, but it had only been a few weeks and the reassurances grew easier to believe every day.

“Cassie?” Jimmy asked. Castiel looked down; Jimmy had slipped a towel beneath his knees to protect himself from the hard porcelain, though he still had to bend his legs at an awkward angle to kneel in the bathtub. Jimmy’s eyes were so beautiful, pupils dark and large, water beading like dew in his lashes, as he looked between Castiel’s face and his cock. “May I clean you up, dirty boy?”

“Oh...” Castiel breathed, cheeks flushing. I am, I’m dirty. This is so wrong, and I want it so badly. And I’m allowed to want it.

“Words, Cas,” Jimmy reminded him, blowing air on Castiel’s cock, a cool contrast to the sweltering water.

“Our inspector was so right about this water heater,” moaned Castiel. His eyes rolled shut and he pivoted his hips to bring his cock closer to Jimmy’s mouth. “Yes, Jimmy. Clean me up, brother.”
Jimmy chuckled, but no touch came. Every pattern of water against Castiel’s skin seemed an inadequate touch, each rivulet that streamed down his torso and legs a paltry caress. The splash of the flow against Castiel and Jimmy, the walls, the shower curtain, was so loud that Castiel could hear no hint what Jimmy might be doing. Anticipation had him rocking his hips forward. His imagination conjured Jimmy’s mouth open before him, moving closer so slowly that Castiel would break if he tried to watch, but he couldn’t watch, couldn’t make himself open his eyes. Wiggling and squirming, cock twitching, didn’t bring him into contact with Jimmy’s mouth. Scant seconds stretched out endlessly; Castiel had enough awareness to realize that only a little time had passed, but it felt like forever.

Coarse cloth ran up Castiel’s leg and he shivered.

“Cold, Cas?” said Jimmy, teasing movements matching his mocking tone as he drew the cloth around Castiel’s butt cheek, up his side, and over his nipple. “I can fix that.” The cloth left, and though the space was so confined that Jimmy couldn’t have moved far, Castiel felt the distance between them as infinite. There was a squeal of metal – the faucet, Castiel realized – and another infinite delay before the water striking Castiel grew even hotter. He was dizzy, lost, lonely, feverish. A squelch broke the silence and then the cloth was back on him, sliding slick with soap. Castiel sagged against the wall, the tiles providing necessary relief from the intense heat of the water, the intense heat suffusing Castiel’s body.

The washcloth swiped over Castiel’s cock.

“Yes...yes, very dirty there,” Castiel breathed. Jimmy barked an incredulous laugh and worked the soap between Castiel’s legs, lathering his pubic hair. “What did you tell me – right, you’d better do a good job, there’s going to be a test after this.”

“Need some soap to wash out that mouth of yours,” suggested Jimmy.

“I’d like to see you tr—” Castiel broke off with a gasp as Jimmy licked the tip of his cock.

“Perfect,” Jimmy breathed. “Spotless.” Jimmy licked again, tongue working at Castiel’s slit, and Castiel’s fingers fumbled for a hold on the smooth tiles. “My mistake, there’s one spot.” Teeth skimmed lightly, teasingly, over Castiel’s sensitive skin, and Jimmy’s lips closed around the head of Castiel’s cock, sucking even as he continued to lick, even as he continued to sponge over Castiel’s crotch. The cloth slid away, rubbed rough over Castiel’s inner thigh and down his leg, landed with a splat on the bathroom floor. Jimmy’s hand splashed water over Castiel’s crotch while he continued his attentions to Castiel’s dick, clearing the soap away.

There was no possible way that Castiel could be dirty.

Jimmy’s thumb ran hard over Castiel’s perineum, and pleasure flashed cold behind Castiel’s eyelids. Jimmy repeated the motion again, again, working his mouth against Castiel at the same rate as he rubbed and rubbed against Castiel’s freshly cleaned crotch.

“Keep going,” Castiel murmured. “That’s perfect, please don’t stop...”

The encouragement seemed to hearten Jimmy, grant him confidence and strength. Jimmy redoubled his efforts, sucked more of Castiel into his mouth, took him deeper, enveloped Castiel’s cock in perfection, heat and wetness beyond anything the shower flow could replicate. The pressure on his prostate was splendid, too, but it wasn’t enough, wasn’t nearly enough, and...

...there’s a way to feel more...
“Jimmy...”

With a wet smack of lips, Jimmy drew his mouth away; even knowing it was coming, Castiel whimpered at the loss. Water splattered on his dick, and he imagined it cooler than Jimmy’s sultry mouth, even though that was absurd. Every droplet pinged stimulation through Castiel, but it wasn’t enough.

Castiel wanted more.

“What is it, Cassie?” asked Jimmy.

_Oh, right. I was going to..._

..._God, am I really going to ask for...?_

Castiel choked on a needy noise as his shame and desire warred.

_Yes._

“Your finger, Jimmy...would you...in my...”

“Words, Cas,” Jimmy scolded gently.

Blinking water from his eyelashes, Castiel opened his eyes and gazed down at Jimmy. His smile was as gentle as his reprimand had been, and Castiel smiled back.

_He’s right here with me, and he’s not judging me. No one else need ever know unless I decide to share, unless I choose to trust them with the truth, as I trust Jimmy implicitly, as I’m coming to trust Dr. Moseley._

“Prostate massage?” asked Castiel.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “I take it back, no words if they are going to be that phenomenally unsexy. We have _got_ to work on your dirty talk.”

“My apologies,” Castiel said, mock serious. “Perhaps I need a demonstration.”

“What, brother, you want my finger in your ass?” Jimmy replied gamely. Castiel groaned, let his feet slide over the bathtub floor, and spread his legs. Jimmy’s thumb ran back over Castiel’s crack and settled over Castiel pucker.

_It’s dirty, it’s..._

Teasing pinpricks of pleasure flushed Castiel hotter.

..._it’s good._

Castiel moaned, slid down the wall, slid against Jimmy’s hand.

“She’s good!”

The pad of Jimmy’s finger teased at Castiel’s entrance, tingling a new, different pleasure through Castiel’s body. With small wiggles, slight movements, soft tugs, Jimmy worked his finger past Castiel’s pucker; Castiel gasped, tensed, squeezed against the intrusion. Jimmy carefully worked out again, brushing over sensitive skin on the outside Castiel’s butt crack.
“Relax,” Jimmy breathed. Before Castiel could reply, Jimmy wrapped his lips around Castiel’s cock again and sucked hard, pumped forward and back, surrounding Castiel in pleasure. He wasn’t sure when Jimmy started rubbing over his hole again, wasn’t sure when Jimmy slid his pointer back in, wasn’t sure when he stopped fighting the intrusion; he came to himself rutting forward into Jimmy’s mouth, rutting back onto Jimmy’s finger, whimpering with every breath. Jimmy’s off-hand ran soothingly over his thigh, grounded Castiel, reminded him that if anything that Jimmy did made Castiel actually uncomfortable, actually unhappy, all Castiel had to do was say stop.

Castiel did not want Jimmy to stop.

Humming approving sounds that buzzed beneath Castiel’s skin the same way the hot water buzzed over the surface, Jimmy sank a finger into him up to the knuckle. The intrusion was strange and new, Jimmy’s fist an unfamiliar, bony mass between Castiel’s butt cheeks, but heat flowed outward from Jimmy’s touch, sparks of pleasure dancing outward as Jimmy twisted and fidgeted inside Castiel’s body.

_In me._

_My brother is in me._

Castiel waited for the clench of guilt and shame, waited for it to choke him. Half-formed whispers taunted him that what they did was wrong, that even if their love was permissible Castiel’s anus was disgusting and Jimmy was defiled by extension, but there was no build toward panic. Jimmy’s finger stilled, his lips continuing to work on Castiel’s cock, his hand continuing his tender, calming ministrations of Castiel’s side, and Castiel was lost. With Jimmy unmoving within him, the sense of awkwardness grew but the pleasure didn’t, and Castiel needed that pleasure to blossom, needed it to burgeon, needed it to twine all around him as Dean’s honeysuckles had enfolded the angel.

_That’s a ludicrous comparison._

_Why?_

_I’m named after an angel, and with Jimmy surrounding me, the water caressing me, I am embraced, enraptured, uplifted beyond anything I’ve known before._

_I’m allowed to enjoy this._

Ignoring the irrational voice that muttered darkly about sin, Castiel chased the instinct that told him to _move_, drowned in the emotions that cried that what felt good was, by definition, right. God created these bodies, made Castiel able to feel bliss, and a merciful Lord could never see pursuit of that bliss as wrong. Clutching that thought with all his might, Castiel took the dive, pivoted his hips forward, and slid them back against Jimmy’s finger. Rapture coursed through him, every individual splash of water against him awe-inspiring, flashing like pinpricks of light against his eyes. Jimmy hummed praise around Castiel’s cock, rubbed his finger over Castiel’s channel, and there was no more thought, not more rationalization, no more justification, there was only ecstasy rising and the incessant, urgent need for _more_.

_More._

Jimmy’s nail pressed into something within Castiel and Castiel groaned, mouth falling open, searing water splashing his tongue.

_More._

Jimmy’s head bobbed over Castiel’s cock, throat sucking on his length, tongue working sloppily
against every sensitive spot.

More.

Jimmy’s thumb rubbed on Castiel’s perineum again, pinched that supremely sensitive spot between Jimmy’s knuckles, outside, and Jimmy’s finger, inside, and Castiel might have screamed.

More.

Jimmy’s supporting hand, so secure, so grounding, massaged hard up Castiel’s side, stretched to cup Castiel’s shoulder blade, and protected Castiel from grinding painfully against the wall.

More!

With a desperate inhalation, Jimmy sucked in air through his nose, sucked in around Castiel’s cock, and then let his head drop forward, let gravity do the work of bringing Jimmy’s lips flush with the root of Castiel’s cock.

Oh my God, more!

Water and light and rapture incinerated the world.

“I’ve got you, brother,” Jimmy murmured.

What?

“I’m not going to let you go. I’m never going to let you go.”

The air was thick, Castiel’s head felt stuffed with wool, and something by parts hard and soft confined his body. Sensation was missing – the water was off, his cock was limp, he’d come, holy hellfire had he come. He’d climaxed so hard that the afterglow yet numbed the tips of his fingers and the end of his nose.

“I’ve got you.”

It took an embarrassingly long time for Castiel to realize that the reason he couldn’t figure out where he was or what was going on was that his eyes were closed. Shaking water from his face, he opened them and found Jimmy beneath him, cushioning much of Castiel’s body from the hard porcelain of the bathtub. They were sprawled awkwardly, Castiel’s knee digging into the basin, Jimmy’s shoulder propping up Castiel’s head. The softness beneath Castiel was Jimmy’s skin, Jimmy’s chest rising and falling, Jimmy’s arms encircling him. The hardness was the tub, and Jimmy must be incredibly uncomfortable, for he lay on his back in it, legs on either side of Castiel’s, supporting Castiel’s weight and protecting him.

Jimmy’s cock was hard, pressed into Castiel’s belly.

There was no thought. There was no pause. There was no fear, no reaction, no concern. Castiel pushed himself to his knees, forcing a pained groan from Jimmy, shrugged off Jimmy’s embrace, shifted his head down to Jimmy’s crotch, and enveloped Jimmy’s cock with his mouth. He still couldn’t take Jimmy deep, but he opened himself as widely as he could, swallowed as hard as he could, gagged and didn’t give a damn because his brother was clean and gorgeous and understanding and everything that Castiel had ever dreamed of. A nascent protest was swallowed as Jimmy cried out, his hips bucking up from the bathtub, and Castiel blinked tears out of his eyes, snorted air awkwardly through his nose, and went down on Jimmy as Jimmy thrust up into every movement. It was over in moments. Only Jimmy’s hands seizing Castiel’s head and hauling him
free at the last moment prevented Castiel from choking on a mouthful of come. Semen splashed over his face, gummed his eyes, dripped from his chin; he accidentally inhaled some and, coughing, settled back on his heels. He felt weird, disconnected, disembodied, yet utterly grounded and sublimely pleased.

“Filthy...is a good look...on you,” Jimmy breathed as if it was all he could do to form words, and then slumped back in the tub.

Castiel didn’t think he’d ever laughed so hard in his life.
Chapter 11

“Fucking weather forecasters and their fucking ‘just a light nor’easter, it’s gonna swing south, high winds and frigid temperatures and minimal snow’ my ass,” snarled Jimmy, jamming his red pen through the page he was editing. The point lodged in the wood of the table.

The storm after Christmas had proved a non-starter: five inches of snow, which for the area was considered minimal, that fell in big fluffy clumps and adorned every bush and shrub and plant and eave like tinsel. Successive storms had piled the snow higher, the weather never warm enough for the previous fall to melt, to a total of maybe three feet so far, though the drifts in the valley around the pond were deeper.

The forecast had suggested today would be more of the same, but events were proving otherwise. It had already been snowing when Castiel and Jimmy woke up to gray mid-morning light, and judging by the accumulation on their previously cleared driveway, Castiel estimated they’d gotten a foot of snow already.

Castiel sighed and dropped his pencil; it rolled over the kitchen table, bounced to the floor, and disappeared amidst the shadows near the fridge.

They’d had no power for four hours. The house was growing chillier, and neither of them had thought to stockpile candles against such an eventuality. The oversight seemed excessively foolish. Leaden skies had given way early to pitch darkness, the snow falling so thickly that the Merchant house couldn’t be seen even before night fell. What few candles they had were gathered into a glowing cluster on the table, flames bobbing in the pervasive, constant draft that they’d yet to find the source of. The smell was the worst part, raspberry mixing with pine mixing with something claiming to smell like “beach” mixing with vanilla into a nauseating miasma that gave Castiel a headache.

According to his cell phone, it was a little after 8 PM. The battery was already dying. It had taken Castiel half an hour to figure out that the reason the damn thing was running through a percent of battery every couple minutes was that it was constantly seeking signal, first from their now-inert modem, then from the cell phone tower that was, presumably, as out of commission as their electricity was. Switching the phone to airplane mode meant he still had some battery life, but likely not enough to last, especially since the odds of them getting power back before the storm ended were poor. Based on the last report they’d been able to watch, the snow wasn’t supposed to stop until at least tomorrow morning.

Outside, the wind crescendoed. It had howled around the house and whistled through the chinks in the roof and rattled the branches of the trees for so long that Castiel had grown accustomed to the noise, but this surge was frighteningly loud. The gale rattled the windows in their frames, pelted the side of the house with frozen pellets of snow. Castiel wondered, ludicrously, if maybe the storm had switched to hail or rain.

“We should get a landline,” said Castiel, staring at his page. His attempt to draw the snowfall was a blurry mess. He glanced at Jimmy. Jimmy was a blurry mess. With a sigh, he slumped back in his chair, pressing at his eyes with the palms of his hands.

“Did you know the air speed velocity of an unladen swallow is actually 24 miles per hour?” Jimmy asked. Blinking blobs of foggy orange light from his eyes, Castiel stared confusion at Jimmy.

“Sorry, I thought we were at the point of utter boredom where we spew random facts at each other until something bizarre triggers a conversation.”
“Why do you know that?” Castiel said.

“Bingo! Got it on the first try!” Jimmy gave Castiel a smile.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about,” said Castiel flatly.

“You know, when you say things like that I’m not sure if you’re serious or if it’s that deadpan sarcasm thing you do,” said Jimmy.

“When in doubt you can always ask,” replied Castiel. “In this case, no, I really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve never seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail?” Jimmy shook his head in mock incredulity. “Sometimes I wonder how we had the same childhood. We don’t even fricken talk the same.”

“You pushed our parents’ boundaries,” Castiel pointed out, “whereas I pretended I was following their plan for me.”

“They really thought you were gonna take over ‘the mission’ when they retired,” Jimmy agreed thoughtfully.

“I told them I wouldn’t.”

“I know you did, I was there.” Jimmy smiled fondly in the memory of the blow-out argument that Castiel and Naomi had had that night. “But they thought you would anyway.”

“Mom never did listen to a word I said.” Castiel sighed. Outside, the wind rushing around the house seemed to echo Castiel’s resignation. “I wonder what they’d think if they knew that if not for you that damn foundation would have been permanently, irrevocably dissolved after they died.”

“They’d say they always knew I was the good son, that they’d seen ‘it’ coming all along, and that God was good.” Jimmy pantomimed their mother’s standard line of holier-than-thou know-it-all nonsense. Castiel felt depressingly like his father as he nodded along. Chuck rarely argued with Naomi and never spoke against her, and the few times Castiel had dared hope that his father actually took his part in something but feared to disagree with Naomi, Castiel had learned to his detriment that no, Chuck’s silence wasn’t profound and portended agreement with his wife. Naomi’s will was iron and her decisions family law.

Castiel should miss them, but he didn’t.

“I’m glad we kept it running,” added Jimmy. “Despite the problems, despite the condescension, despite the religious repression, we were able to help many people. We—”

A resounding crack interrupted Jimmy. There was an almost human shriek of wood straining followed by a booming crash that echoed the snap, snap, snap of shattering branches. Castiel and Jimmy leapt to their feet. The clatter of their chairs falling backwards was soft in comparison to the explosion that had rattled the house to its foundation. They froze, staring at each other, uncertain. The storm dulled the noise, generalized it, made it seem like whatever had happened could have been in the front yard, or the backyard, or maybe something had hit the house, or perhaps a car had crashed on the road nearby, or...

The room was absolutely silent, not even a whisper of wind, not even the susurration of snow falling against the bug screens over the windows. Flickering candle light made the sudden calm eerie, shadows dancing over the walls as if alive.
A rumbling boom broke the silence, followed by more snaps, and with the wind briefly still it was obvious the sound came from the backyard.

Panic seized at Castiel’s throat.

“The willow,” he said hoarsely.

Dean!

His feet carried him to the hallway, to the backdoor, before he thought through what he was doing, before he even processed that in his head the willow and Dean had become synonymous.

That’s insane.

Crazy or not, the two were linked somehow, Castiel was sure of it, and he jerked the bolt aside, pulled the door open, and ran out into the cold.

“Cassie!”

Snow fell more thickly than Castiel had ever seen before, tiny flakes near invisible individually but en masse thick enough that Castiel couldn’t make out the willow, nor any of the trees on their property, nor the pond. Where their backyard should be was a wall of white, and Castiel plunged forward into the snow banks, too terrified for his friend to consider that he wore nothing but wool socks, comfy loose jeans and a long sleeve shirt with a sweater over it.

No sooner did he step off the porch that the world went topsy-turvy. He’d forgotten about the stairs, invisible beneath the snow depths. His ankle twisted and snow melted upon contact with his body and soaked through his pants, his socks, his shirts, and numbed his hands. Flailing, he tried to figure out which way was up and right himself.

“Cassie, are you out of your mind? Get back inside!” Jimmy shouted. The night muffled his words, made the back porch scant feet behind him seem otherworldly.

Flakes snagged in Castiel’s eyelashes, evaporated to mist before his eyes. Only the brilliance of the snow, gathering what light there was from unfathomable places, enabled Castiel to see anything. Glancing back to reassure himself, the house looked distant, too, Jimmy a dark silhouette against the black mass that was visible primarily as an absence of snow, a void in the night where Castiel’s thoughts swore more whiteness should be.

“Whatever’s happened, there’s nothing we can do until the snow stops!”

There’s no way I can explain that I’m worried about Dean. There’s no way that I can justify my fears. It makes no sense, but I know...I know...

Fumbling to his feet, Castiel rose, slipped, failed to find traction, and finally got his hands beneath himself and rose. They’d not shoveled a path through the backyard. There’d been no need, no cause to go back there as winter thickened and each storm deepened the ocean of white. Merely clearing the driveway had been a monumental effort. Their next advance they were definitely buying a snow blower. Beneath his weight, layer upon layer of snow gave way. Every time he thought he’d found something solid, thought he’d found the ground, ice cracked and he plunged deeper. Over successive days, successive storms, the surface of the snow had melted under the heat of the sun, resolidifed to ice when in shade or darkness, and Castiel could find nothing that would support his weight.

Castiel walked, stumbled, fell, forged onward as best he could through snow that was never below
his knees, and sometimes drifted as high to his chest. Jimmy continued to call after him, but the words were indistinct, meaningless. Castiel was cold, so cold through, but he pushed himself forward, hoping that by going straight he’d not get lost. The pond was close to the house. The willow was close to the house. He’d made the trek a hundred times, he could do it once more no matter the obstruction.

Blind terror for his best friend proved exquisite, terrible motivation.

*If I’m cold, how much colder is Dean?*

*I have to find him. I have to protect him. I have to save him, warm him, clothe him, house him, feed him.*

*This is insane.*

*Why am I so sure he’s out here?*

*I don’t know.*

*I’m certainly wrong.*

*But if there’s even a chance...I have to find him!*

The shock of stepping forward and encountering no resistance destroyed what equilibrium Castiel had managed to achieve. He tumbled into open air and fell, grunting in pain, vertigo spinning the world in a sea of black streaked and speckled with pale gray. Gasping in huge swallows of air that chilled him from the inside out, Castiel shivered uncontrollably. Copper tanged on his tongue and his body hurt as if he’d been beaten up. Castiel squeezed his eyes shut and focused on keeping calm, getting himself back under control, and he didn’t open his eyes, didn’t try to move, until he was sure that the direction he faced was up and that whatever was beneath him was solid snow that would hold his weight.

Solid, yes.

But whatever it was, it wasn’t snow.

Ice, maybe? Had he found the pond? If so, he was fortunate that he’d not fallen through. In this cold a dunk into water could kill.

*Unless I’m already so wet and chilled that I can’t tell the difference?*

*That seems unlikely.*

*But I will be in danger if I don’t start moving.*

*I can’t leave Jimmy alone, not now, not when we’ve finally reached an understanding.*

*And Dean needs me.*

Opening his eyes, Castiel shook his head in a vain effort to force away the snowflakes that fell onto his face. With a groan, he sat up. His surroundings were dark, far too dark to be part of the snowy backyard. He rubbed his hands together, created frictional warmth until he had feeling in his fingertips again, and felt beneath him. His elbow twinged pain, the copper flavor in his mouth intensified, and something sharp dug into his butt. Beneath him was *ground*, actual soil and rocks, with only a light dusting of snow limning the contours of the torn earth. Pushing himself to his feet,
Castiel walked tentatively, a step, two steps, tripped over something invisible in the darkness, tumbled forward and hit something solid, standing at a right angle to the ground like a wall. Soil smeared over Castiel’s face and got in his mouth.

*Stop, Castiel. Think. What’s going on?*

There was no snow, implying the ground had been recently exposed. There was soil, rather than the pond or reeds or mowed grass or leafy ground – the snow hadn’t been merely blown away, it had been removed, along with the turf beneath it. There was ground beneath him. There was ground before him.

If a tree fell…

…if it was the willow…

In the darkness, it was impossible to tell what might have happened and Castiel’s worries ran amok. He had to try to keep calm before he made any more poor decisions. If Castiel could only find another landmark…keeping a hand on the wall of dirt before him, Castiel carefully skirted around the obstacle. His fingers brushed soil, roots, and rocks. He tried to test the ground before him, tried to be sure of his footing before he continued, but his feet were so cold he could scarce tell. One step, another, another, he tried to find anything he recognized – Sam’s stump, the reeds, the pond, the willow…

Splashing clued Castiel in that something was wrong. There should be no liquid water, not with the weather this cold, but he could hear it around his feet even if he couldn’t see it, couldn’t feel it icy against his benumbed flesh. Stepping back quickly, he sighed. This was futile. He was going to kill himself – or at least lose a toe – and he’d help no one. Everything was blackness, save the snow, which dazzled as if luminescent.

Castiel was no longer sure which way the house was.

“Damn,” he muttered. “Damn!”

“A cassie?”

A beam of light danced overhead; as Castiel tried to find the source, Jimmy crested a hill – *what hill? There’s no hill in any direction from the pond, not shaped like that* – and came into view, bundled up against the cold and holding a flashlight.

“There you are! What the hell were you thinking, you stupid son of a bitch? You might have died!” So much of Jimmy’s face was covered by his hat and scarf that only his eyes showed, glittering like onyx in the night.

*He’s beautiful.*

“Mother’d be upset if you referred to her that way,” Castiel tried to say, but his teeth chattered and the words muddled together. There was something wrong with the statement, some reason that Naomi would never know what had happened, but Castiel couldn’t put his finger on why not and that worried him.

“Jesus fuck, Cas, mom’s been dead for a year, and she was a bitch,” Jimmy snapped. Holding the flashlight at an awkward angle, Jimmy sidestepped his way down into the trench. The dancing light beam revealed a pit that looked to have been roughly dug out by a giant hand, rocks exposed, ground shredded, roots torn apart. The wall on which Castiel leaned was a lattice of roots interlaced with dirt, woven around rocks of all shapes and sizes, lightly dusted with a thin layer of
snow, individual flakes twinkling like diamond dust. The beam reflected searing bright off water pooled at one end of the hole, and at the other end Castiel caught a glimpse of pink.

*No, that’s impossible, except...*

“Jimmy, the flashlight!” Cassie demanded, trying to scurry toward the flicker of color he’d seen on feet as numb and unresponsive as bricks. Eyes narrowing, Jimmy made it to the base of the trench.

“What?” he asked.

Croaking out an angry noise, Castiel tried to grab the flashlight, but all he managed to do with fumbly fingers was flail at Jimmy’s arm. His throat felt seared by the cold. His body was strangely warm, and Castiel had enough lucidity left to realize he wasn’t worried, and he should be. Castiel tugged on Jimmy’s jacket, the fabric of which he couldn’t feel, and pointed. Jimmy said something indecipherable but followed where Castiel dragged him, and the light beam skimmed over the far side of the inexplicable chasm in their backyard.

“Dean!” Castiel cried.

Dean’s face wasn’t visible, his body limp against the ground. He lay on his front, arms stretched out as if he’d tried to climb up the steep side of the pit and lost consciousness before he was able to escape. If not for the pink hat that Castiel had given him, Castiel would never have spotted him. He didn’t respond to his name being called, didn’t move, didn’t even appear to be breathing. With a ragged cry, Castiel stumbled to him.

“Fuck,” Jimmy muttered. “Fucking hell, we are so f*cked, how are we going to...?”

Bending down, Castiel tried to squat but fell to his knees. He was too warm, feverish, numb hands shaking, but Dean was before him, unconscious, maybe hurt, and that trumped everything. Grabbing hold of Dean’s side, he tried to roll Dean over, but couldn’t.

“Jimmy, we have to—”

“I know!” Jimmy snapped. “We gotta get you - *both* of you – inside.” While he spoke, Jimmy stuffed the flashlight in his pocket, circled to Dean’s other side and got an arm under him. “Holy *shit*, he’s heavy. Come on, Cas, do what I’m doing – support his other side, we gotta drag him out of the hole. It’ll be easier once we’re out on the snow.”

“The hole...but why is there a hole...?” Castiel muttered distractedly, looking around, running a filthy hand through his sopping hair.

“The willow’s down...and the pond’s...overflowed,” Jimmy huffed as he hauled Dean up. “Cas, I know you’re struggling but I can’t do this alone. Your friend weighs a f*ckton. Come on!”

“Right...right,” said Castiel.

The bobbing light in Jimmy’s pocket cast bizarre shadows behind them, only helpful because the snow seemed to gather even the faintest illumination and magnify it. Castiel wrapped an arm beneath Dean’s shoulders and hauled up with all his strength, though that proved to be little enough. If not for Jimmy, Castiel could never have moved Dean.

“Thank you Jimmy.”

“On three, Cassie...one, two, *three!*”
Jimmy lifted and stepped forward, and Castiel imitated him, and they managed to get Dean maybe a foot closer to the snow drifts above. Dirt flaked and crumbled beneath Castiel’s weight and he nearly fell.

“Again – one, two three!”

One step at a time, they escaped from the hole.

“Again!”

Snow fell the whole time, until Castiel’s hair dripped streams of water, until his clothes clung to him, but Dean was either incredibly heavy or Castiel was frighteningly weak with cold or, he suspected, both.

“Again!”

At least the physical exertion helped push away the chill.

“Again!”

The unnatural feeling of warmth was gone. His numb extremities tingled and his teeth chattered.

“Again!”

Sometimes, they’d advance a step only to slide back down as soil crumbled to dust or melted to mud beneath their feet.

“Again!”

Jimmy’s strength, the courage in his voice, leant Castiel strength.

“Again!”

White snow made a wall before them, feet above the soil line, but it was soft, plush, and they fell forward into it, gasping for breath. Dean was dead weight, buried in the drifts, and Castiel strained to roll him over so he wouldn’t inhale too much snow.

“Can’t...can’t rest,” panted Jimmy. “You’re too cold – he’s too cold. Come on, Cas. You can do it – we can do this.” Nodding – his mouth was dry, his throat burned, there was no point attempting to speak – Castiel took hold of Dean again and tugged toward the black outline, the snowless, vaguely home-shaped area a million miles away.

Jimmy was wrong.

Dragging Dean through the snow wasn’t easier.

But after a lifetime, breathless, exhausted, the porch was before them, the snow-covered stairs creaking under their weight. Gasping, Castiel tripped to his knees and slammed into the wood. Jimmy hefted Dean alone and covered the last few steps, threw the door open, and fell into the house. It was all Castiel could do to crawl the last few feet, and he only managed it because of the glorious burst of hot air leaking the promise of salvation within the house.

No sooner did he cross the threshold that he collapsed, kicking the door shut behind him. Every muscle felt liquid. Lifting his head was too difficult to contemplate.

“Come on, Cassie.” Jimmy’s voice was hoarse. Rolling onto his back, Castiel looked up at his
brother. Jimmy’s wool hat and scarf were caked with snow, wet globs falling from him to spatter on the floor beside Castiel. His pants were damp to the hip, his shoulders a half inch deep with flakes. “You’re not out of the woods yet.” Castiel chuckled, though it sounded more like a hacking cough. “I mean it. Your clothes are soaked. Gotta get you warm. Take that stuff off, I’ll grab a towel.”

“What about...” No sound came out. Castiel swallowed and tried to get some moisture into his mouth. “What about you?” he called after Jimmy, who’d already wandered down the hall.

Smiling, Jimmy looked over his shoulder as he unwound his scarf. By the faint light of the candles and wildly jostling flashlight beam, he looked flushed and unhealthy.

“I’m fine, Cassie,” said Jimmy. He was lying, but Castiel couldn’t bring himself to call Jimmy on it. They’d talk later. “I’m worried about you.” That, certainly, was true. “And Dean, I guess. How’d you know he was out there?”

Castiel forced himself to sit up, glancing at Dean as he tried and failed to pull his saturated shirt off. The wool of his sweater felt like it had shrunk to bind his torso and shoulders. “I don’t know. Just...when I heard the crash, he was all I could think about.” Jimmy grunted.

Finally, Castiel got a grip on the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. The skin beneath was frigid, clammy, and frighteningly pale. Lying back down, Castiel tried to undo the button on his jeans but the fabric had gone stiff with water and ice. The clomp of Jimmy’s boots faded as Castiel struggled, only the sound of doors opening and closing to speak to his brother moving about the house. Frustration made Castiel keep fumbling uselessly until Jimmy finally returned, propped the flashlight butt-side down on the table next to the front door, and brought a candle over.

“Fuck, Cassie, you look terrible,” breathed Jimmy.

“Thanks, brother,” Castiel replied. “You look fantastic as always.” Jimmy had taken off his winter gear and stripped his wet pants off. Bare-legged, his dark hair made him look mottled. His boxers hung low on his hips and his shirt swayed loosely. He looked amazing. A surge of affection brought a warm glow to Castiel’s chest.

“Let’s get these off you,” Jimmy said with resignation, though his lips quirked into a smile. Jimmy tackled the button but had no luck either until, tsking, he finally worked it loose. “Lift your legs.”

Castiel tried. He really, really tried, but all he managed was to get his knees up, splayed to either side. Jimmy sighed and shimmied the pants down slowly; the material clung to Castiel’s soaked skin. At first Castiel tried to help, fumbling at the waist band, but Jimmy slapped his hand away and it hurt so much that Castiel cried out, drawing his fingers to his chest protectively.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Jimmy muttered. “You probably need a doctor, and Dean definitely does, and we can’t even call a damn ambulance.”

“Land line,” Castiel managed, collapsing against the floor. Jimmy, amazing, fantastic, brilliant Jimmy, had a handle on the situation. Jimmy could and would take care of them. Castiel had gone to save Dean and had ended up needing saving himself. He was so tired, so incredibly exhausted; cold weighed on him like a mountain had settled on his shoulders.

“What was that, Cassie?”

Castiel’s pants came free and Jimmy fell backwards with a thud. The fabric slapped sodden against the floor.
“If we had a land line we could call 911,” Castiel repeated, enunciating as best he could.

Jimmy froze, then burst out laughing.

“Yeah, I guess we could,” he said ruefully. “That’s why you brought it up earlier?” Castiel tried to nod and couldn’t figure out why it didn’t work.

Oh, right, I’m lying down. The floor’s in the way.

The thought was inordinately funny, and Castiel coughed out a laugh.

“Can you move, Cassie?”

“I’m sure I can figure something out,” Castiel deadpanned.

“Good, ‘cause we gotta get Dean’s clothes off, too, and get you both warmed up. It’s gonna be a bitch without power, but we’ll manage. Good thing you’re two of the hottest fuckers I’ve ever met. Snuggling for warmth’ll be awesome.”

“If we were hot we wouldn’t need to snuggle for warmth.”

*Dean really is one of the handsomest men I’ve ever seen. Even Jimmy thinks so.*

Jimmy erupted in laughter and reassurance spread like fire through Castiel’s limbs. Flopping to his hands and knees, Castiel crawled over to help Jimmy. Pain accompanied every movement, but Castiel ignored it as best he could. Dean wasn’t out of danger yet.

*There was no one here to protect Sam from whatever befell him, but Dean’s not alone. He’s got me to help him. He’s got us to help him.*

*God I hope we were in time.*

*Please let him be alright.*

Uncontrollable shivering couldn’t keep Castiel from dozing off. Beyond exhausted, he slumped in the blankets on the floor. Dragging Dean to the makeshift bed that Jimmy had assembled before the fireplace in the living room had taken the last of Castiel’s strength. Every time he blinked, he lost minutes.

Blink.

Candles illuminated the room, arrayed on the coffee table. The air smelled of *cold*, and nothing else, like snow clogged Castiel’s nose. His hair was finally dry, curled into ringlets about his face.

Blink.

Dean lay beside him, terrifyingly still but, more than that, simply terrifying.

Blink.

*No, no, he’s still Dean. Whatever else is...is...whatever else is impossible, he’s still Dean. I’m sure this is Dean. He looks like Dean. He smells like Dean. He was wearing the clothing I left for Dean.*

*Is ‘he’ even the right word? Should I refer to...him...as ‘it’ instead? Or is this even Dean? Maybe it’s some bizarre doppelganger, or a carving in the likeness of my friend?*
It was wearing the clothes I left by the willow tree.

No. That’s impossible.

Everything about Dean is impossible.

Blink.

Gaunt, pale, skin brown and withered, there was no mistaking Dean for human. He looked human, shaped correctly, with legs and arms, head, even a penis, though it hung stiff between his legs, turned downward, not shriveled and tight against his body with the cold like Castiel’s dick was. Exposure to the freezing temperatures and frigid snow and icy water had split the skin of Castiel’s hands and feet. Rocks had torn his elbow open when he fell. Dark blood made dried haloes around Castiel’s wounds, scabs black in the dim light. Wounds pitted Dean’s limbs but there wasn’t a fleck of blood and no sign that the cold had damaged his extremities. His body was solid and heavier than even a muscular man’s should be. Now that Castiel had feeling in his fingers again, Dean’s skin was rough and striated like bark. Despite their close friendship, despite the hours they’d spent together throughout the summer, they’d never touched before. Thinking back, time and time again Dean had found subtle ways to avoid skin-to-skin contact. How oblivious was Castiel that he hadn’t even noticed?

Blink.

Though Castiel and Jimmy had both looked Dean over, they could find no injury large enough to account of Dean’s continued unconsciousness.

No. All things considered, ‘unconsciousness’ was too mild a word.

Dean was immobile, practically sessile. His chest didn’t rise and fall, though Castiel could swear he’d seen Dean breathe, heard him pant with effort, seen him sweat. Abrasions and cuts marred Dean’s skin, but where blood should be each wound was instead scabbed with a bead of tacky resin, like varnish or tree sap. Dean was no less beautiful, but everything incongruous, everything inexplicable, everything that had seemed off about Dean stood out in Castiel’s mind. Dean was impossible, and even seeing his body, seeing he was truly impossible, offered Castiel no explanation, rational or irrational, for what Dean was or where he disappeared to or why he’d never willingly entered the house and had repeatedly refused to meet Jimmy. Castiel thought surely he had all the pieces, that he should be able to figure out the puzzle now, but whenever he reached for what he knew, the information scattered and he couldn’t construct a coherent explanation.

Blink.

Jimmy was in the room, poking listlessly at the fireplace. His shoulders drooped, his movements slow like he was pushing through molasses.

“Come to bed,” Castiel mumbled, words slurring together. Jimmy had wasted a small amount of their hot water – already faded to lukewarm – to make Castiel tea. Jimmy had upended a bottle of honey over the cup, and the combination had gone a long way toward soothing Castiel’s throat and pushing him toward sleep.

“I will soon,” Jimmy promised, giving Castiel a tired smile that didn’t touch his eyes. “You’re still cold, and I’m still not certain Dean’s not dead. We need a fire.”

Blink.

Heat warmed Castiel like the sun and he leaned into it, trembling with cold. “‘s not dead,”
whispered Castiel, wrapping an arm around Dean’s bare torso. There wasn’t a strand of hair on him except on his head. How had Castiel never noticed his arms were bare? Because he always wore a long sleeved flannel shirt, even in the hottest weather. Dean was so cold that proximity made Castiel colder, and though he longed to embrace Dean closer and help bring life to his inert body, he shrank back from the chill that threatened to settle into his bones, shrank toward Jimmy as Jimmy shimmied beneath the blankets.

Blink.

The fire crackled and smoked on the hearth, the only light in the room, bright to Castiel’s aching eyes, sweltering to his cold-seared skin. His shaking intensified, and when he tried to tense his muscles to prevent the tremble, his quaking only grew more violent.

“What’s that, Cas?” asked Jimmy, hissing as his hot body pressed against Castiel’s frigid one.

“Dean’s not dead,” Castiel repeated. Reaching out, he skimmed his hand over Dean’s side, found one of his cuts, and ran his finger through the tacky liquid that sealed it. The resin, or whatever it was, chipped off on his hand, and a new bead formed immediately, seeping free, glimmering copper and gold and sienna in the candle light. “See?”

“I don’t know what I see,” Jimmy admitted. “Your buddy here? Totally freaking me out. Screw who is he – what is he, Cassie?”

“Dean,” said Castiel, shrugging, his aching elbow and stiff shoulder hitting something solid. Jimmy grunted. Oh right, he’s right behind me. “Sorry. He’s just…Dean. If he’s willing, he can tell us more when he wakes up.”

“Yeah.” Jimmy sighed and relaxed against Castiel’s back. There was nothing erotic about their closeness, though they were both naked, though heat flared through Castiel at the contact. Castiel was powerfully reminded of when they were children, when they’d share a bed, when puberty was a distant dream they knew nothing about and wouldn’t have cared for even had they known. When the nights were cold, when the locals were hostile, when their parents were cruel, when the darkness was absolute and terrifyingly impenetrable, they’d lie close, their twin the only point of stability in a world that constantly changed incomprehensibly, inexplicably, around them.

“You’re still so cold. How do you feel, Cas? Is there anything else I can do?”

“God, no, don’t do more,” Castiel mumbled. “You do so much, Jimmy. So much. I don’t know what I’d do without you.” With Jimmy warm behind him, Dean’s chill was less awful, less draining, and Castiel wrapped around his friend. Dean’s rough skin felt strange against his, like hugging a tree, but as he got used to it, Castiel found it more natural. Yes, it was alien – maybe he’s an alien? – but there was a kernel of warmth, a trace of softness that no plant had, a skin-like quality that Castiel lacked the words for but that was distinctly, undefinably human.

Of course he’s human. Dean is one of the most human people I’ve ever met. He’s so real, so genuine, so open, so kind, so caring, so beautiful...

“This is nice,” breathed Castiel, snuggling his chest closer to Dean, shimmying his behind back toward Jimmy. Jimmy made a soothing noise, ran a hand that felt like fire over Castiel’s side, and pulled closer to him.

Even as tired as I am, even as worried as I am about Dean, even as mysterious as he is, this feels great – as good as lying with Jimmy.
Maybe even better.

We’re going to have to talk about that.

As soon as Dean is better.

Dean will get better.

With a pleased sigh, Castiel went limp against his pillow, went limp against his brother, went limp against Dean, and fell asleep.
Chapter 12

Jimmy’s got me sandwiched against the wall again.

Groggy, Castiel mumbled protest. Jimmy blew out in his sleep and didn’t budge. Castiel put a hand on the wall and tried to push away enough that his face would no longer be mashed against it.

The wall moved and pain throbbed through Castiel’s hand.

Huh?

Blinking sleep gunk away, Castiel opened his eyes.

And still saw nothing.

The room was pitch black save for a glow like foxfire coming from several feet away.

Sleep addled, it took Castiel several more blinks and long moments of assessing himself and his surroundings before he remembered what had happened the night before.

The snow.

The willow tree.

The frostbite.

Dean!

Is Dean alright?

Alarmed, Castiel tried to surge to a sitting position to check on his friend, but every joint felt solid and ungainly, swollen by exposure and cold, and every muscle twinged agonized Charley horses. With a groan, he fell back down. Jimmy grumbled nonsense, something about having to go to school, shifted, wrapped an arm around Castiel’s chest, and pinned him in place. Night-blind, Castiel used his hands to explore Dean by touch. His bark-like skin was more familiar, less strange, than it had seemed the night before, and warmer, especially where his body was pressed against Castiel. They were wedged close, Dean solid and so heavy that he’d seemed a wall when Castiel was more asleep than awake, but beneath the thick blankets all of Dean seemed warmer – surely warmer than transferred body heat alone could account for – and Castiel breathed a sigh of relief.

His fingers traced over Dean’s hunger-sunken belly...

...does Dean eat?

...up the smooth contour of his chest...

...does Dean breathe?

...over the slight curve of his manly breasts and nipples that seemed carven into a permanent semblance of semi-arousal...

...do women of Dean’s species lactate?

...along a clavicle that felt so much like wood that it earned the sobriquet ‘chiseled’...
...does Dean have bones?
... traced up his neck...

...does Dean have a pulse?
...over the cut line of his jaw, and brushed lightly over his lips.

It had to be Castiel’s imagination that Dean’s lips felt softer than the surrounding skin.

Does Dean have muscles? Does Dean have saliva? Does Dean kiss? If he does, what does it feel like?

For me or for him?

What is Dean?

Holding his hand loosely over Dean’s mouth and nose, Castiel felt for breath, felt for moisture, felt for any sign that Dean was alive, but aside from the warmth he felt nothing. A small, selfish, pointlessly cruel part of him suggested he could flick another of Dean’s scabs away, hold a finger over the wound thus exposed to feel the sticky substance that passed for Dean’s life’s blood pool, but Castiel quelled the thought. Dean’s bleeding the night before, Dean’s warmth now, were confirmation enough that Dean was fine. There was no call to cause Dean further suffering merely because Castiel sought reassurance.

Please let him be fine.

“God, you’re thinking so hard you woke me up,” Jimmy grumbled.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel replied. Even his jaw ached. “And I’m sorry about last night. What I did was...incredibly poorly thought out. I don’t know what came over me.”

“The words you’re looking for are ‘fucking stupid,’” said Jimmy, “with a side of ‘insanely dangerous.’ Is your boy still driftwood?”

“He does feel like wood, doesn’t he?” Castiel said thoughtfully. He’d made the allusion repeatedly in his head, as ridiculous as it seemed, and Jimmy had noticed too. Trying to capture the feel of Dean’s texture, Castiel ran a finger down Dean’s sternum, along the dip between his solid muscles, and down his belly.

Dean didn’t have a belly button.

Surprised, Castiel laid his hand flat on Dean’s belly, feeling for a nub or a dip that would suggest an innie or an outie, but he found nothing.

Of course, because why would there be even one normal thing about Dean? He’s extraordinary in every way.

Castiel was glad the darkness hid his flushed cheeks.

With a groan, Jimmy rolled over, rolled out of the covers and used a hand to tuck them around Castiel. “If I’m up, I might as well be up – see if we have power back – though judging by how fucking cold it is out here, we don’t – and see if the snow’s stopped.”

“I’ll help you,” Castiel offered, sitting up.
Tried to sit up.

Every muscle in his back seized, his hands throbbed agony as he leaned his weight on to them, and he fell back to the floor with a cry.

“Shit, Cassie,” Jimmy breathed. “We need to get you to the hospital.”

“I’m fine,” wheezed Castiel. He took a shaky breath and repeated, “I’m fine. Or I will be. We don’t have the money to cover the co-insurance on an ER visit and there’s nothing wrong with me that I didn’t do to myself while I was being fucking stupid doing insanely dangerous things.”

“Get this,” said Jimmy dryly. Bumps and clatters and a quashed exclamation spoke to him trying to navigate around the dark room. “If I decide it’d be brilliant to use an unsecured ladder to hang Christmas lights, fall off the ladder and break my damn leg, I still deserve medical treatment even though the chain of events that led to the accident was moronic and entirely of my own doing. If you need treatment, you need treatment.”

Movement caught Castiel’s eye. Jimmy had found his way to the window and tugged the curtain aside. From the floor, Castiel could see nothing but deep blue outside, likely still nighttime, but lighter than the absolute darkness within the living room. Billowing cloth and the lovely contour of Jimmy’s perfect facial features made a jet black silhouette highlighted in navy blue. Jimmy turned toward Castiel, a smile quirking his lips, and every lovely feature was picked out in the pale, sourceless light that reflected from the snow outside.

“Okay.”

Captivated, Castiel wasn’t sure what he was agreeing to. Twisting, he tried to improve his view, tried to etch every detail of the moment in his mind so that he could etch it in truth later, capture his brother’s living, stunning likeness in dead inks and paper so that the world could see how utterly, breathtakingly ideal James Shurley was.

“Good.” Jimmy’s casual tone was incongruous with the profundity of Castiel’s thoughts, and he shook his head, struggling to reconcile the two. “Bonus, snow’s finally fricken stopped. I’ll double check the electricity, but I’m thinking no. The best use of my energy, such as it is, is to start digging the driveway out. There’s no dealing with any of these other problems if we can’t get the car out of the garage.”

“Be careful, Jimmy.”

“Always, brother. I’m not you.”

Chuckling, Jimmy navigated the room by the faint light, a moving shadow that Castiel could scarce resolve.

*Just like Dean is a moving sculpture I can scarce explain. And I’m just a moving fleshsuit of atoms and molecules and DNA and enzymes and cells that somehow metabolize and somehow think and live and breathe. Really, objectively, is it any weirder that I’m alive than it is that Dean is alive? Is it any less inexplicable? Any less remarkable? No, the only difference is that the magic of my existence is familiar and accepted to the point of being taken for granted, whereas whatever animates Dean is new and unfamiliar to me. Among his people, I imagine humans are considered as astonishing as I find him.*

What do you mean they have holes in their navels?

What do you mean they open their mouths to inhale the atmosphere, and there’s moisture in there,
and they also put other atoms and molecules in there that they then masticate, swallow, and somehow digest? How can a mouth do all those things? What’s inside a human? How insane is that? And on top of that the same organ lets them press against another human and feel pleasure? Isn’t that disgusting? And humans act like that’s totally normal!

Humans are so weird!

The thought brought a smile to Castiel’s face as Jimmy opened the remaining curtains, grabbed a candle from the table, and headed out of the room. Moments later, a single flame lit the blue shadows afire with faint gold and Castiel lay back, let his eyes drift shut again, imagining all the fascinating conversations he would have with Dean when Dean finally woke up.

Wait you mean humans don’t have permanently erect penises?

What do you mean humans excrete waste?

Being human sounds messy and disgusting. I’m glad I’m the sculptural embodiment of perfection instead.

Carven, just like the angel weeping for Sam is carven.

Dean carved the angel.

Who carved Dean?

So many questions and not a single answer...

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was tugging the blankets off and being confronted by how cold the house had grown in the 16 hours since they’d lost power.

No.

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was crawling up the stairs, his legs too weak to support him, navigating to the bedroom he didn’t use any longer and digging through his drawers to find something, anything, to wear that might keep him warm.

No.

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was getting dressed.

No.

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was sliding back down the stairs on his butt, every bump to the next step down jolting pain up his spine and down his sciatica.

No.

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was forcing himself to stand again when he got to the bottom.

No.

The hardest part of Castiel’s day was descending to the frigid basement and digging their small propane camping stove out of the disorganized mess of things they’d not bothered to deal with since they moved in.
No.
The hardest part of Castiel’s day was carrying the heavy equipment up the stairs.

No.
The hardest part of Castiel’s day was navigating the kitchen, stretching his screaming muscles and bending his swollen fingers in an attempt to reach things on high cabinet shelves, struggling to stand again when he dropped to his knees to pull out a pot.

Yes.

Everything was hard. Castiel felt awful. He was panting and sweaty by the time he had the stove set up and ready to go, and he collapsed into a dining room chair, uncomfortable, but at least most of his muscles were spared supporting his weight while he was sitting. Misty gray light suffused the kitchen, soft noises preternaturally loud. The *plop-plop-plop* of water spoke to the sink spigot left slightly open in the hopes of preventing the water in the pipes freezing. The wind hissed around the house, the familiar loose clatter an almost welcome sign of normality. Branches groaned under the weight of snow heaped on them. Creaks and crunches were undefinable, maybe caused by Jimmy’s digging or the snow settling. Drifts stacked so high against the leeward side of the house that the window was half-blocked. Trying to muster the energy to move again, Castiel wondered idly how Jimmy had gotten outside. The back porch had, in past storms, been kept clear by the prevailing winds, but snow had accumulated on the front porch every time. Castiel imagined Jimmy going out the back and dragging himself through snow up to his waist, circling arduously to the front of the house and using his hands to dig a way to the garage door before he could even *start* excavating their driveway.

*He saved my life and Dean’s last night, has pushed himself to his limit, is pushing himself to his limit again right now. What right have I to complain?*

Groaning, Castiel pushed himself upright, freezing hunched over, blinking back tears and the red-hot flare of pain through his body. The teapot was on the top shelf, too far for Castiel to bear stretching to retrieve it, but he filled a pot with cold water, set it on the burners, and set about getting things ready. Hot chocolate first; Jimmy deserved something delicious to drink that would warm him through. Then, Castiel was thinking eggs – the food in the fridge would spoil soon unless their power came back on. The more Castiel could use the better. Cheese and spinach omelets would make a great source of protein. A heaping serving of pasta would let Castiel finish the open jar of tomato sauce and provide the carbs to rejuvenate Jimmy and fuel his exertion. Getting the cocoa powder ready, tearing open the pasta box, using a spoon to stir the boiling water into the drink, everything was difficult, his fingers so unresponsive that even simple tasks became dangerous.

*What if this is permanent? What if I’m not able to draw again?*

Castiel pushed the thought away, pushed through his pain and nascent worry and focused on essential tasks. He didn’t know enough about the damage cold could do to have a sense of how prolonged the swelling in his joints might be, and there was no use obsessing about it until they had power again and their internet came back on and he could read worst-case scenarios on WebMD and over-react.

The packaging said the pasta needed 9 minutes to cook, but there wasn’t a functional clock in the room and Castiel decided to conserve his cell phone battery rather than check. He’d been cooking pasta since he was 11. He could manage without a timer.
Settling back into the chair, Castiel closed his eyes and tried to think about anything other than the pain thrumming continuously through his body. He’d caught a glimpse of the backyard when he’d been upstairs, and another through the window in the back door. Snow carpeted everything; even the pit dug out by the fall of the tree was a bowl of glistening white, but the tangled mass of tree roots was bare soil scattered with clumps of snow precariously clinging on. By day the damage proved both better and worse than Castiel had feared.

The tree hadn’t fallen completely.

That was good.

The thick trunk had split when the tree had tilted, and the part that was now on top was more substantial, looked to be completely broken off from the rest, and weighed down on the part beneath. That looked bad, very bad, the balance maintained tenuously, and Castiel feared that if a professional wasn’t brought in soon, the part that had split – likely beyond saving, though Castiel knew little about such things – would crush the other part, ripping the entire tree from the ground, killing it.

*This is why everyone said the tree had to go.*

The thought of having the willow cut, of mirroring the stump of Sam’s willow with the stump of the other, made Castiel want to cry.

*But it’s dangerous as it is now. We can’t leave the yard like that, and with the tree half in the water it’ll damage the pond as well, and the plants growing around it. Dean may care about that willow tree but he loves the pond. When I tell him we have no choice, he’ll understand...*

*...not that it’s up to him! This is our land, our property, and if the best thing we can do is to chop the willow down, then we should—*

A crackling crash interrupted Castiel’s thoughts, the house shook again, and Castiel attempted to leap to his feet only to fall to his knees with a second crash. Breathing hard, Castiel fumbled forward, striving toward the window, in the hopes he’d be able to see what had happened. Had his fears for the willow already been answered, or had another tree fallen, or had—

A ragged scream, surprisingly similar to the splitting sound the trees made as they shattered, dragged Castiel’s attention back to the house, back to where he was. Sliding over the tiles of the kitchen floor, his pain forgotten in a rush of adrenaline, Castiel scrambled toward the living. Dean thrashed against the blankets, cry after ragged cry leaving his throat, words choked off in desperate breaths.

“No, no – I tri—couldn—Sam!”

*If he doesn’t breathe, how does he talk, how does he scream?*

“Sam, Sam, mama – mama, help Sam!”

*Right, because that’s a helpful thought right now.*

“No – not good – not – I couldn’t, I couldn’t, I couldn’t, I—”

Dean’s eyes were open, aglow, brilliant green, but he appeared to see nothing. He flailed around at random, slammed an arm against the side of fireplace so hard there was a crack, knocked the coffee table aside, and seemed impervious to pain, oblivious to his surroundings.
“I have to stop him – immobilize him – before he hurts himself!

“Can’t!” Dean gasped, collapsing like a puppet whose strings had been cut, tangled in the blankets they’d slept in.

At least this is confirmation that he isn’t dead.

“Dean!” Castiel shouted, but there was no sign Dean heard.

Still babbling, a word that sounds like ‘stop’ muffled by the bedding, Dean struggled against the demons in his head, tore at the blankets as though he thought them an enemy from whom he had to protect himself. Castiel thought better of his plan to try to restrain Dean; the blankets tore like paper in his powerful grip, feathers from the down comforter and cotton batting from the quilt bursting fluff into the air. In the chaos, Castiel could scarce see what was happening. He scrambled back toward the door, bumped into something solid, and blinked as a clump of feathers floated close to his face. There was another crash, a groan, silence, and Castiel opened his eyes to see Dean lying on the ground unmoving, limbs sprawled at an awkward angle.

“Dean,” he cried again, reaching forward, only to be arrested by a hand on his shoulder.

The solid “thing” behind him was Jimmy.

“Gotta be careful – not gonna let him attack you,” said Jimmy with an apologetic half-shrug. His face was flushed, the hair peeking out from beneath his hat matted down with sweat. “Don’t get me wrong I totally buy that he’s safe normally but he’s clearly not in his right mind. I heard the shouting from outside.”

“You’re right,” said Castiel with a sigh.

“I know I am.” Jimmy smirked. “But, hey, silver lining – he’s not dead.”

“Or at least he wasn’t before he fell and whacked his head on the ledge around the fireplace,” Castiel grumbled.

“Exactly!” Jimmy paused then sniffed the air. “Is something burning?”

Castiel groaned. The pasta had definitely been on the propane burner for more than 9 minutes.

“Maybe we should tie him down?” said Castiel uncertainly.

Dean had awoken delirious six times.

“Do we have any rope strong enough to hold him?” Jimmy countered.

After the second outburst, Jimmy had the bright idea of moving all the living room furniture a safe distance away.

“And what would we tie him to?” Castiel added, contradicting his own suggestion.

Dean’s thrashing didn’t seem to injure him, and even if he didn’t knock himself back out, he generally collapsed within a few minutes.

“Truth,” said Jimmy, throwing himself down on their sofa, now pushed against the wall of the
room farthest from where Dean lay. “I’d been thinking your bed but between your injuries and my
shoveling I doubt we’re strong enough to get him upstairs, and even if we were – what if he woke
up while we were moving him? He’d bash our damn heads in to protect his dead brother.”

Dean could do a lot of damage in a couple minutes.

“I had no idea he was so strong,” Castiel admitted. He tried to think if he’d observed any feats of
might from Dean, but nothing sprang to mind. Dean had even asked for help righting the angel
when she fell over.

Must have been trying to act human…

“It’s kinda hot,” said Jimmy with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrow. Shooting him a stink eye,
Castiel took a seat in the arm chair, now wedged on the opposite side of the room from the sofa,
which was placed to catch the TV should Dean find a way to tip it.

“Please tell me you mean the house, now that the power is back on,” said Castiel.

“Aw, come on, don’t lie to me and say you haven’t thought about having Mr. Swol there hold you
down.” Jimmy’s jocular tone suggested he was attempting levity, but something about it was off.

“Jealous?” Castiel tried to emulate Jimmy’s teasing note but mostly sounded sad. He mostly felt
sad, and in pain, for that matter.

“Out of my mind with it, more green than his damn perfect eyes, for most of the summer,” Jimmy
admitted. “Kept thinking – well, at least if the guy’s a serial killer, I’ll get my brother back.”

“You never lost me,” Castiel frowned.

“Yeah, I get that now but at the time…” Jimmy shook his head and flopped back against the couch.
At least Dean was still unconscious. Castiel wouldn’t stop worrying until Dean woke up in his
right mind, but he really didn’t want a witness for this conversation.

This is my opening to admit...

...what exactly?

“If it was every going to be anyone but you, it’d be him,” said Castiel softly. Jimmy lifted his head,
opened his eyes and stared at Castiel so hard that the distance across the room seemed non-existent.
Blue gaze nearly as magical, nearly as impossible, as Dean’s, Jimmy watched Castiel and said
nothing. ‘I’m sorry.’

“Don’t be,” Jimmy finally replied. “I knew, or I mean, I figured...it was obvious, in how you talked
about him, in how excited you got when you spent time with him, in how desperate you were to
figure out if any of our neighbors knew anything ’bout him. I’d never heard you talk about anyone
like that before.”

“That’s only ’cause you’re not around when I talk to other people about you,” said Castiel. Jimmy
smiled. “Dean is great, Jimmy. Really. I kept trying to get him to meet you but he always said no.”

“Probably something to do with that whole definitely not human thing he’s got going on,”
suggested Jimmy. Castiel nodded. “This is weird.”

“I know.”
“No, but this is so fucking weird,” Jimmy reiterated. “At least now we know why we could never figure out how he came and went from the property. What is he? I want to call him a doctor but I don’t think I could find one who’d believe us, much less have the expertise to treat a...a...what, a living, breathing, talking sculpture? And then there’s you—”

“I’m not leaving him home alone,” Castiel repeated, as he had every time Jimmy had pointed out that with the driveway clear, and the road outside plowed and theoretically drivable, Castiel should go to the hospital. “I feel a lot better.”

“Oh yeah, you look great,” muttered Jimmy. “How’s standing been going for you?”

“Last time I make you hot cocoa,” Castiel said.

“No! No, I take it all back!”

Chuckling, Castiel grinned. “I love you.”

“I know,” Jimmy said flippantly. “God, you scared the ever-loving shit outta me yesterday. You nearly killed yourself because you thought this blockhead might be in danger—”

“And I was right, he was!”

—and so I gotta ask – do you love him, too?” Jimmy went from teasing to serious so quickly Castiel could scarce keep up.

Silence stretched out.

Jimmy stared at him.

Oh right. He expects me to answer.

“I don’t know,” Castiel admitted.

“But you’re sure you love me?”

“God, yes.”

A slow smile curled Jimmy’s lips, brought warmth and light to his eyes, and took Castiel’s breath away. “Good. That’s all I needed to know. We can worry about the rest when you and he are both feeling better.”

“I’m not sure about this,” muttered Castiel, pacing the length of the kitchen as Jimmy sat in the chair at the head of the table. The second morning after the storm, he’d woken up feeling much better, though he couldn’t look at his toes without cringing. The skin was swollen, one toe blackened, but as long as he kept his weight on the balls of his feet he was okay. Moving hurt but helped work the stiffness out, so Castiel kept walking. Jimmy still grumbled about taking him to the hospital, why did I bother digging the driveway out if you’re going to refuse?, but Castiel was more worried about Dean.

“I’ve called every tree removal service in a 100 mile radius – they’re all booked ‘cause of the storm and our case is apparently the exact definition of non-emergency,” Jimmy explained. “But you’re worried, and I get that, so if you want it dealt with – this is our option.”

From what Castiel had read on the internet, as frightening as what had happened to him was, his exposure hadn’t been severe and there was little a doctor could do now that he was out of
immediate danger. His hypothermia had been somewhere between mild and moderate, and his frostbite was only first degree. He didn’t have a single ice blister, and no part of him had remained numb after Jimmy had warmed him. He’d heal, and be in pain until he finished healing, and nothing a doctor did now would make any difference.

“I know, but...” Castiel shook his head.

Jimmy thought Castiel should stop pretending to be Dr. Sexy, MD, because of something he’d read on Google.

“You want me to hang up, I ca—Hey!” Jimmy interrupted himself brightly. “Mr. Bender?” Castiel could hear the gruff voice on the other end of the line indistinctly, though the inflection was suspicious. “It’s James Shurley?” The squawk on the other end was comically loud. “Jimmy?” That brought an understanding sound. “We had a tree go down during the storm and were hoping to hire you to take it help with the mess.” Another pause, with an explanation. Castiel wished he’d thought to suggest Jimmy put the phone on speaker. “Uh, no, that’s a deal – are you sure you don’t want more?” It was too late now. “Yeah, we can handle that. Would tomorrow morning work for you?” Jimmy nodded to the phone as Mr. Bender spoke. “Great, see you then.”

Jimmy hung up and set the phone aside.

“200 bucks,” said Jimmy, shaking his head in wonder.

“Really?” Castiel asked incredulously. “That’s a fifth of the cheapest estimates we got from the ‘real’ companies.”

“Right?” Jimmy shot Castiel a cocked grin. “They might be crazy Deliverance hillbillies but at least we’re gonna save a bundle of money. Come on, Cas, it’s not so bad – we never have to talk to them again after this.”

“Good,” said Castiel. A scraping sound – wood on wood, or something like wood against wood – caused Castiel to turn toward the living room, steeling himself for another explosion from Dean, but nothing came. “I don’t want them to see Dean.”

“What, you think they’ll kill him?” Jimmy laughed, lifting his arms to either side of his head and wiggling his fingers like he was casting a spell or something. Castiel frowned. “What really? Look, I get that people keep warning us against them – they’re creepy and weird and obsessed with killing things, like, who does that? But if they’d done anything illegal – if they’d killed Sam Winchester, or if hikers disappeared ‘cause the Benders shot ’um or something, someone would know.”

“People do know,” Castiel pointed out. “Mrs. Mills and Dean—”

“Both said, ‘stay away’ but had no evidence and provided no specifics,” interrupted Jimmy. “We’ve been over this. You agreed to call them. The whole thing is ridiculous, Cas, and we need that tree cleared away before it does any more damage.” Outside, there was an ominous creak, as if to remind them both why it was necessary to deal with the damage promptly.

“I don’t trust them,” Castiel muttered.

“You don’t trust anyone,” Jimmy countered.

“That’s not true, I trust you, I trust Dr. Moseley, and I trust Dean,” said Castiel. “And Dean said they were bad news.”
“Cassie...”

“Mom always said not to raise problems unless we could posit a solution,” Castiel said. His feet hurt. A lot. Annoyed, he dropped into the chair opposite Jimmy with a grunt. “The problem is the tree. The Benders are the solution. But after this...we’re not inviting them to the next barbeque.”

“Deal!”
Chapter 13

Castiel left Jimmy to coordinate with the Benders. They'd driven up nearly an hour ago in a rusted out pickup truck that rattled so loudly that the noise caused snow to avalanche off a nearby tree. A backfire informed the twins when the car pulled up, and had triggered Dean to roll over and moan incoherent misery without waking up. The pickup back held a mound of equipment, a chainsaw, and multiple saws clattering and shifting in a way that couldn’t be safe. The two grown Bender boys and their father were packed cheek by jowl in the front seat, bursting out as from a clown car once the truck was parked.

Looking at them, watching their gleeful grins as they readied their gear, made Castiel feel sick. He’d been on the verge of calling the whole thing off when a crash out back reminded him of the necessity of what they were doing, and he forced a grin on his face and bit his tongue, literally, to keep himself silent. Jimmy had taken one look at his face and sent Castiel back into the house.

Castiel sat with Dean.

I should help Jimmy...

His feet hurt. His everything hurt. As part of the deal with the Benders, Jimmy had agreed that the brothers would dig out the snow enough for the Benders to get their equipment close to the tree. It had taken hours, and when they’d gotten back in the house they’d found Dean lying amidst the smashed remains of their coffee table. Feeling confined seemed to be what set Dean off to violent hallucination in the midst of whatever fever dream afflicted him; the only destruction Dean wrought when he was allowed his freedom was, to all appearances, accidental.

Dean doesn’t need me to sit here and babysit him.

The thought of seeing the Benders, of watching their unmasked delight as they destroyed the willow that Dean loved, that Castiel had grown to love, made him nauseous.

It’s okay that I’m in here. I’m serving a necessary function. If I repeat that to myself enough times, I might even believe it. And Jimmy thinks I’m the brave one, of the two of us? He routinely does things I haven’t got the courage to do.

Someone might come to call or knock on the front door. Dean might surge to his feet and try to smash through the plaster-and-lathing walls at any moment. Jimmy was better with people. The Benders didn’t look at Jimmy with the same suspicion with which they eyed Castiel.

There were so many reasons it made more sense for Jimmy to deal with the Benders.

Though, I suppose I also routinely do things he hasn’t the courage to do. Those things don’t seem nearly so important, though. I should write that perception down so I can discuss it with Dr. Moseley. I don’t know if it’s linked with my self-disgust but regardless it’s not mentally healthy.

The buzzing of the chainsaw starting outside was clear within the house, and Castiel wished he had something that would keep him from hearing. The grinding cut out, there was a sputter, a backfire, and the chainsaw started again. Castiel seriously considered putting his hands over his ears.

The pitch of the chainsaw changed.

Dean screamed, like he was in agony, like he was...
...like he’s being cut apart by a saw.

Castiel could no longer hear the saw cutting through the willow trunk. All he could hear was Dean’s shrieks.

Oh my God.

Surging to his feet, Castiel sprinted for the back door.

Yes, he’s wood, but he’s not a sculpture

Every step was painful, but in comparison to Dean howling his way through dying, Dean’s wails as he was carved up by a chainsaw, Castiel’s pain was irrelevant.

He’s the tree.

Castiel slid into the door at the same moment Jimmy took the back steps in a single leap.

Dean didn’t come and go at random.

“Jesus Christ, Cassie, what’s going on in there?”

He’s been here all along.

They have to— “Stop!” Castiel shouted. Jimmy started and followed Castiel’s gaze to where the Benders took the chainsaw to the trunk of the willow, standing beside the wood grinder in the cleared area that Castiel and Jimmy had dug out.

“What’s going on?” Jimmy demanded.

Dean’s screams chased Castiel out of the house, down the stairs, along the path Jimmy had dug out.

“Cas, they’re wearing noise cancelling head phones. They can’t hear you!”

The dead grass was slick beneath Castiel’s feet, his toes agonizing and unresponsive. A divot kicked up under his weight, inertia took over, and he fell hard to his face, slamming his jaw. Pain and the taste of blood coated his tongue. Jimmy was at his side in an instant, trying to help him.

Dean was still screaming.

“You have to...” Castiel spat out saliva; a bright red stain spread through the snow where it landed. “Stop them, Jimmy. Stop them! They’re killing Dean!”

“What?”

“Dean is the tree,” Castiel explained breathlessly. “That’s how the Benders killed Sam, they cut down the other tree. That’s why they couldn’t go to the police. Jimmy—”

Jimmy moved before Castiel finished speaking, interrupting him by shouting, “On it – get Ranger Mills!”

Right. She said to call if we needed help. We need help. Oh God, Jimmy...

“Be careful!” Castiel shouted. Jimmy shot him a thumbs up, and Castiel dragged himself up and half ran, half limped back to the house.
Dean’s cries flogged Castiel to ever-greater haste, but his aching body rebelled, his limbs refused to work right, and his muscles were too weak to engage. Unhelpful thoughts distracted him – *is Jimmy alright? Will the Benders stop? Why does Dean pause screaming and then resume as if he’s run out of breath when he doesn’t breathe? Do I even have Mrs. Mills’ phone number? By the time he got his cellphone his hands were shaking, helpless tears streaking his face. His fingertips were cold enough that the touch screen didn’t respond to his swipes, and it took him four tries that seemed to take forever to get to her entry in his contact list.*

Ring.

Endless silence on the phone; endless screaming from Dean; endless grinding of the chainsaw against virgin, living wood.

Ring.

“Hell-oh fuck, what the *hell* is that?” Mrs. Mills shouted. “Is this a prank call? If this is—”

“Ranger Mills, it’s Castiel,” Castiel interrupted, afraid she’d hang up on him.

“What was that?”

“*Cas-ti-el!*” he shouted. “Ranger, they’re killing Dean. The Benders are killing Dean!”

The screaming stopped as abruptly as it had begun, the chainsaw sputtered to death, and the silence was so profound that Castiel’s ears rang.

A gunshot boomed across the glade.

“Oh my God,” Castiel said, feeling sick. He tried to rise, tried to run toward the backyard, but his knees gave out. “Jimmy!”

“Castiel – Shurley, you stay right where you are!” Jody yelled, inexplicably breathless.

Another gunshot tore through the air, tore through Castiel’s mind.

*God please let it not have torn through Jimmy. Would that sound different? I don’t know! All the times I’ve been around people and creatures being shot, I never noticed if a shot that strikes flesh sounds different than one that flies into oblivion. Why didn’t I notice? Why didn’t I pay attention? Oh God, why did I tell Jimmy to go out there? I’ve gotten my brother killed, I’ve gotten both of them killed, and—*

“Calm down,” Jody snarled, and Castiel realized that, unable to make his body function correctly, he’d resorted to whispering *oh God, oh God, oh God*, a prayer for his brother, an echo of his frantically pounding heart. “Cas, there’s *nothing* you can accomplish by going out there. You lock your doors and stay safe, and I’ll be there in a jiffy.” A wheezing grinding sound in the background took a moment to resolve in Castiel’s mind as a transmission whirring and an engine starting.


“Even if your brother is in danger, even if he’s hurt, you think there’s anything more important to him than being sure you don’t get hurt too?” *Yes, I think he’d probably like to be alive and if something does happen to him, what will I…how will I… “He loves you, Cas! So you watch out for you, and for Dean if he’s with you, and let Jimmy see to himself.”*
Oh God, Dean. Is he…?

The wall provided essential support as Castiel tottered and staggered to the living room. Dean lay limp on the floor, arms and legs splayed at impossible angles. Voices shouted outside, but Castiel couldn’t tell who spoke. At least there were no more screams, nothing to suggest that anyone was hurt.

Unless Jimmy was killed instantly. Please let him be alright. Please, please, please…

Castiel sprawled on the floor, reached out and grabbed Dean’s wrist to feel for a pulse.

“Cas, you still there?”

No. No heartbeat. He doesn’t have a heart. He doesn’t breathe. He doesn’t have organs or a circulatory system or anything because he’s not human.

But he does bleed.

“Yeah, yes, I’m here, I’m…I’m checking on Dean.” Vertigo pushed back against Castiel’s attempts to get control of himself, his skin tingling, but his heart rate was starting to slow, and a desperate gasp that swelled his lungs reminded him that he needed to breathe even if Dean didn’t.

“How is he?” asked Mrs. Mills, soothing, steady, confident, words measured and calm. Castiel managed a second big inhale, exhaled it with slow control.

Looking Dean over, Castiel spotted one of the scabs that he’d resisted picking at earlier. Screw restraint. He had to know if Dean was alright. Castiel flicked the dried sap away.

Nothing happened.

God, no.

Nothing happened.

Please, let him be alright.

Nothing happened.

I need him. I need him and Jimmy. Is that asking too much? Don’t leave me all alone!

A tiny speck of sap beaded from the cut, glittering in the sunlight that flooded the room, and Castiel sobbed. “He’s alive!” A relieved sigh from Mrs. Mills made a loud rush against the phone mouthpiece.

“I’m outside. Gonna hang up now, okay?”

The chainsaw buzzed to life again.

A third gunshot rang out.

Someone screamed.

Silence fell. Fear clenched at Castiel again, but he forced himself to keep breathing calmly. His foolish behavior during the storm – how was that only three days ago? – meant he was useless now, and he hated it, hated himself for his idiocy.
But if I hadn’t rushed out in the storm, what would’ve happened to Dean?

Probably nothing, if he’s really the willow tree. The willow, as damaged as it is, is still alive, and nothing Jimmy and I have done since it was damaged has had the least influence on that.

Until we tried to ‘fix’ it. Then it all came crashing down.

I risked Dean and Jimmy for nothing.

Castiel tried to rise again, but his aching muscles and his swollen toes made it impossible. The moment he put weight on his feet the pain was excruciating, and with a frustrated sobbing shudder, Castiel sank back to the floor beside Dean.

At least he’s alive.

Rolling to his side, Castiel wrapped an arm around Dean’s chest and shimmied closer to his friend. Dean was warm now, though he still look gaunt and withered.

With no leaves, winter must be a lean time for sentient trees.

Are Dean’s people common? Have I met beings like him before? I have so many questions. Even if he wakes up I may never get to ask him but I hope...I hope I get the chance, and I hope he is willing to tell me. I want Dean to trust me. I want Dean to feel I’m dependable, to feel he can count on.

I’m off to a great start.

A sigh deflated Castiel against Dean’s side. At least Castiel heart rate was calming, at least his breathing was steadier. There’d been no further noise from outside, which Castiel chose to take as a good sign because he couldn’t bear the alternative. Surely, if the worst had happened, the Benders would start the chainsaw again.

Unless Jimmy is seriously wounded or dead and they’ve fled the scene of the crime.

The Benders had been urging Castiel to remove the willow tree from the first time they met. Snuggling Dean’s inert form, Castiel focused on thinking through what that implied about the Benders, about Dean, and about Sam, rather than dwelling on Jimmy’s uncertain fate. Ranger Mills thought the Benders might have murdered Sam, but the Benders had said the willow tree was dead when the previous owners called them to cut it down and chip the trunk. The Merchants said Sam disappeared, and Dean said that there’d been no body left to bury. Did he mean that the tree was reduced to sawdust? If Dean’s willow tree had been cut down, would Dean have disappeared? That would suggest he was an illusion, but he felt utterly solid, utterly reassuring, utterly steadying, as Castiel ran a hand down his chest. Would he merely have gone inert?

So many questions, always so many questions. What if—

Ears attuned to catch the merest hint of what was happening outside, the soft noise that Dean made seemed loud. Alarmed, Castiel tried to edge away, but pain made him slow. Fortunately, instead of surging violently into motion, Dean sighed, rolled so he was chest to chest with Castiel, and wrapped an arm around him. A familiar, warm glow dissipated some of Castiel’s fear, tension, and pain.

I do love him. I love him and Jimmy.

I’m in so much trouble.
But I can worry about that later, when I know everyone is safe.

For now—

The click of the door opening pulled Castiel’s attention.

“Cassie?” Jimmy called. Relief flooded Castiel; his arm tightened around Dean and he pressed his face to Dean’s chest, trying not to sob as the anxiety that had knotted his insides vanished. “Cassie, you okay? Where are you?”

“I’m...” Castiel swallowed mucus and spit and tears and tried again. “I’m fine. I’ve been worried about you!” Outside, a shrieking whirr spoke to the pickup truck starting.

“I’m good, I’m—” Creaks spoke to Jimmy reaching the doorway to the living room and freezing. “Oh. Uh.”

Castiel tried to roll over but Dean’s arm was heavy, even draped limp over Castiel’s back. “It’s not what it looks like,” Castiel said, his lips brushing over Dean’s bare skin with every word.

“What does it look like?” asked Jimmy blankly.

“I haven’t the foggiest,” Castiel admitted. “I was so scared for you, and I was so scared for him, and Ranger Mills said I shouldn’t go outside, she said...and I would have anyway but the shoveling yesterday...you know...and...I didn’t know what to do, Jimmy. I’ve never felt so helpless, so useless, before.”

“You boys okay?” Ranger Mills called from down the hall, her boots stomping on the worn wood. “It looks like you may have found the answer to that question I asked you the other day,” Jimmy finished in a rush as Mrs. Mill came into view. “Thanks for calling Jody. She saved my life.”

“You boys okay?” Ranger Mills called from down the hall, her boots stomping on the worn wood. “Bullshit,” Mrs. Mills snorted. “When I got out there, your brother was holding the Benders hostage with their own shotgun. I ain’t never seen Pa Bender look that scared in my life. Heck, come to think about it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Pa look even a little scared of anything nor anyone. He prefers others be afraid of him.”

“Jared pissed himself,” added Jimmy smugly.

Twisting, Castiel managed to turn so that Dean was the big spoon and Castiel could see Jimmy and Mrs. Mills. Neither wore an expression that Castiel could interpret, but neither looked surprised or disturbed to find Castiel in the arms of the unconscious tree person on the floor. For whatever that was worth. The position was uncomfortable, hard wood pressing into Castiel’s aching flesh, but it meant so much to Castiel that Dean had embraced him gently after how violently Dean had behaved the past few days that Castiel couldn’t imagine moving.

The only time Dean didn’t lash out every few hours was that first night. While we were sleeping with him. How did I miss the correlation before?

“Sorry, hospitality,” Jimmy said, stuffing his fist in his mouth against a yawn. “Please have a seat, Jody. Do you want anything?”

“No, I’m good,” she replied. “You boys look bushed. Had a rough storm?”

“What was your first hint?” said Castiel flatly.
“Hey, you do have a sense of humor!” she said with a broad grin.

“Castiel is the funniest angel in the garrison,” Jimmy replied without missing a beat. Castiel choked on a laugh and Mrs. Mills looked at them like they’d both lost it.

*Calling her about the Benders killing someone by chopping down the tree in my backyard struck her as perfectly sane but this is her limit? People around here are weird.*

*We fit right in.*

“Our parents were on a mission in Peru when we were born,” Castiel explained. Jimmy and he had both heard the story a zillion times. “They’d left for the trip when mother was only in her first trimester, and it wasn’t until Jimmy was out that anyone realized she was having twins, so they weren’t prepared with two names. Joshua – one of the other missionaries – he came with us many times, our families were close – anyway, his children were Uriel and Raphael and, when asked, he immediately suggested my name also be angelic, hence why I’m Castiel. We grew up together. Many of the children on the missions had angelic names, since we were all from religious families, so it became a running joke that we were God’s garrison on earth sent to spread the good word. And none of that matters, because Uriel was the funniest angel in the garrison, and you still haven’t told me what happened with the Benders!”

“Honestly, I’ve been wondering too,” said Ranger Mills, turning to Jimmy. “By the time I showed up Pa was already shakin’ in his boots and I was just back up. Jimmy had everything under control.”

“Okay – okay,” said Jimmy, pacing excitedly, running a hand through his hat hair. “So I get out there and I tell them to stop, but they can’t hear me. I had to practically tackle Lee before Pa put the chainsaw down. That pissed Jared off, who grabbed his shotgun and the son of bitch fired a warning over my head – either that or he has shit aim. Lee was furious, started screaming his lungs out about Jared nearly shooting him, and Pa started the chainsaw again to shut them up and remind them, ‘task at hand, boys!’ In the scuffle, Jared dropped the shot gun, so I grabbed it and fired it in the air to stop them again. Then there was Pa, like, ‘what you gonna do now? No more ammo! You gonna shoot us?’” Jimmy turned a shit-eating grin on Castiel and said, “So I did! I pulled the trigger! *And the gun fired!*”

“But that was a double barreled shotgun,” said Mrs. Mills, frowning. “It can only be fired twice without reloading.”

“I know!” Jimmy crowed.

“How...?” asked Castiel

“How is your loverboy there a fricken tree?” countered Jimmy. “It’s a miracle or magic or some shit!”

“Dean’s not a tree,” said Mrs. Mills, frowning.

“Then what—”

“Still ain’t gonna tell you, if he hasn’t,” she interrupted.

“Oh, fine,” Jimmy said petulantly. “So, yeah, third shot was the charm! By the time Jody came up those three woulda agreed to anything, they were so scared of the magic shotgun. Which they left with me. It’s out back.” Manic energy had him circling Castiel, looping their small living room. “So Dean’s not, like, literally a tree, but if that tree outback dies, then Dean’ll die, right?”
“Yeah,” she agreed, a begrudging scowl twisting her mouth.

“How bad off is the tree?” asked Castiel.

“I’d need to take a closer look but...to be honest, I’d say the part that split is done for,” said Mrs. Mills. “For the rest...it’s probably salvageable. Dean’s still here. That’s a good sign. I know this guy, we call him whenever we’ve got a tree in the park that we want to cut down, and 9 out of 10 times he finds a way to save the damn thing. He’s a magician – a...a tree whisperer or somethin’.”

“Really?” asked Castiel, shooting a confused look at Jimmy, who was still grinning.

“Huh?” asked Mrs. Mills blankly.

“Is he really a magician?”

“Wha? No, he’s a botanist,” she said, shaking her head. “His name’s Garth. I’ll give you his number. You give him a call, and if the willow can be saved, he’ll do it.”

“He’ll save Dean?” asked Castiel pointedly.

“He’ll save Dean,” Mrs. Mills confirmed. “But don’t tell him ‘bout Dean! Especially don’t share some cockamamie bullcrap ‘bout Dean bein’ a tree!”

“Would he cause problems?” Castiel’s hope shifted to concern.

“God, no, Garth’s as harmless as a butterfly, but he’ll never give you a moment’s peace once he knows someone like Dean exists.” Mrs. Mills laughed.

“That’s what we needed to hear,” said Jimmy, sighing in relief and dropping into a chair. Still manic, he crossed one leg over the other knee, foot jittering, but at least he was no longer pacing.

“Thank you, Mrs. Mills,” Castiel said.

She frowned. “For goodness...look, you want Garth’s number, I’ve got one condition.” She wagged a stern finger in Castiel’s direction. “You don’t agree, you get nothin’.”

“Anything!” Jimmy and Castiel exclaimed simultaneously.

“Jody,” she snapped.

“Thank you, Jody,” Castiel repeated sincerely. “You’re a true friend to Dean.”

“To all you boys, I hope. And remember what I said about assault charges!”

Castiel looked a question to Jimmy.

“Well, the Benders shot first...”

“So you’re going to call the police?” asked Castiel.

“Already did, while I was drivin’ over,” Mrs...Jody said. “Hopefully it’ll be at least enough to get a warrant, if the cops finally take this seriously and act fast. I have a feeling there’s some damn incriminating stuff in that disgusting shack of theirs. They’ll be here soon I’m sure – they’d better be. Sheriff Kontos is a useless tool – pardon my French – but I think I talked his ex-wife into coming instead. She’ll hear us out if anyone will. We should give her that shotgun they left behind, too – maybe we’ll get lucky and she’ll be able to tie it to an open case or something.”
“We really can’t thank you enough.”

“God, yes you can – you already have. Stop, please! Just make me some more of that pot roast and we’ll call it square.”

“Deal!”
“Hmm...” said Mr. Fitzgerald, chewing his lips distractedly as he paced around the willow tree. Castiel had been shocked by how quickly Jody’s friend had agreed to come help at their property.

You’ve got a willow tree how old? Hot damn, I’ll be there in an hour!

“Uh huh.” Mr. Fitzgerald ran a hand over the bark, though what he could feel through his mittens was anyone’s guess.

*How old is this tree? And does that mean Dean’s old, too? No wonder he knew so much about what this area used to be like. I must seem like a naïve child to him.*

“Uggghh.” Shaking his head, Mr. Fitzgerald looked on the verge of tears as he inspected the wound caused by the chainsaw, a brilliant pale line dug into the darker bark.

*Does it mean something that the Benders attacked the section of Dean that is still healthy, the lower part that hasn’t broken free completely of the ground? What do they suspect? What do they know?*

“Tsk, tsk,” murmured Mr. Fitzgerald, knee deep in snow as he looked at where the willow branches disappeared beneath the re-frozen icy surface of the pond.

Jimmy was curled up with Dean now.

Castiel was *definitely not* jealous.

“Not good?” Castiel ventured. Being outside hurt, but Jimmy was exhausted after talking to Sheriff Hanscum, and an hour lying on the floor with Dean had proved surprisingly rejuvenating for Castiel.

*If Jimmy likes Dean too...*  
...then what?

*I’m being ridiculous. They’ve even had a conversation.*

...so what? *Am I hoping Dean harbors affections for me? Where does that leave Jimmy? I’m being so much more than ridiculous – shallow and selfish....*  

“Huh? What?” Fitzgerald startled out of his introspective inspection and looked at Castiel like he’d forgotten he was there. For a moment Castiel suspected their confused expressions matched – what had he asked again? – and then he shook his head to clear his thoughts.

“Do you think you can save the willow?” Castiel reiterated.

“Oh, that!” Fitzgerald broke into a board, toothy grin. “Easy peasy. It’ll be messy but I can probably have it done within the next hour.”

“What?” exclaimed Castiel. “Really?”

“Absolutely,” Fitzgerald nodded. “Got an awesome winch on my truck out front. I mean, the *truck* is out front, the winch is in the back where a winch belongs – not that there’s anything wrong with
preferring your winch in the front but it’s a damn silly way to go about towing something.
Anyway, I’ll bring it ‘round – the truck and the winch – you boys even cleared a path for me, how
thoughtful! – and wrap the chain ‘round the trunk, get you upright again, and that should do the
trick!”

“It’s that simple?” Castiel looked in astonishment from Fitzgerald, apparently severely
underdressed in mittens that looked to be made out of old socks, an open brown canvas jacket with
a plaid flannel buttoned up beneath, and a ragged old cap, to the tree, ancient, cracked, half-frozen
in ice, to the disc of roots that stood taller than Castiel where they’d ripped free of the ground.

“Simple? Yeah, sure! Unless it all goes wrong,” agreed Fitzgerald, beaming. “We’ll have to watch
the angles pretty damn careful to keep the busted part, this here—” He pointed at the section of the
trunk that had broken free and that Castiel thought beyond saving. “—from smashing into your
house. It’ll be noisy as hell and you’ll still have a shit-ton of wood to deal with but the part that can
be saved’ll be saved, and the rest will settle in a way that’ll wait ’til spring. Or it’ll sink into your
pond, and maybe flood your septic system.” Fitzgerald rubbed his hands together eagerly. “Ready
to find out which?”

“Uh...” Castiel was too tired for flippancy, and had no idea if Fitzgerald was serious or not.

“Awesome, I’ll pull ‘round right now!” Fitzgerald said, striding briskly toward the front of the
house.

Staring after him, Castiel wondered bemusedly if he should go after the lunatic.

Jody said if the willow can be saved, Garth Fitzgerald can save it.

I trust her. But do I trust her with Dean’s life? I let Jimmy talk me into calling the Benders and both
he and Dean nearly died!

Honking pulled Castiel from his thoughts; Fitzgerald hadn’t bothered to close the driver’s side
door of his pickup truck, and he pulled around the house waving and beaming and honking as if
they’d not met in years and Fitzgerald wanted to be absolutely sure that Castiel had seen his
approach. Distant cracks and a rushing sound spoke to snow falling somewhere in the woods, and a
flock of crows Castiel hadn’t noticed took flight in a whirling, interweaving, cawing cloud, winging
to quieter climes.

The entire mountain can probably hear that racket.

Fitzgerald started to hop out of the car, held up a restraining finger as if Castiel had moved – he
hadn’t – and ducked back in and did a quick K turn to position the car. His winch was hitched to
the back, a thick chain wound around it.

“Ready?” Fitzgerald called as he idled the car and dashed to where Castiel stood.

“You’re serious?” said Castiel flatly.

“Why wouldn’t I be serious?” replied Fitzgerald with so much incredulity that Castiel realized
Fitzgerald thought that, of the two of them, Castiel was the weird one.

Fitzgerald is probably right. There’s a treeman snuggling my brother in the living room.

“How much will this cost?” Castiel demanded. “How much damage will the tree do when it falls?
What are the chances that the part of the tree that didn’t break in the initial fall will survive
this...procedure?”
“Sorry, sorry, didn’t realize you had questions, uh...” Fitzgerald quirked his head to the side, smiled dopily, and looked the tree over. “To answer your first question – it’s free! I don’t do this for money, I do this ‘cause I love trees.” There wasn’t a trace of irony in his voice. *Everyone who lives on this damn mountain is crazy, and I’m crazy for talking to them.* “Anyway, I gotta job at NCCC, I’m set.” Castiel looked at him blankly. “North Country Community College. I’m head of the Environmental Science program.”

“So you actually do know what you’re talking about,” said Castiel wonderingly. Despite himself, he was actually starting to like Fitzgerald. *Jimmy’d love him, I bet. He should be out here, not me. Anyway, I gotta job at NCCC, I’m set.* Castiel looked at him blankly. “North Country Community College. I’m head of the Environmental Science program.”

Well, no, not really. I didn’t make it snow. I didn’t cause the wind to tear the tree from the ground. But I made myself sick. I have no right to complain about the inevitable consequences of my own poor decisions.

Fitzgerald looked crestfallen and Castiel felt a spike of guilt. “You thought I didn’t know what I was talking about?”

“I’ll admit it did seem a little...fishy...that your solution to fixing our tree was to prop it back upright and hope for the best,” admitted Castiel.

“And where did you get your PhD in botany, little mister?” The warmth in Fitzgerald’s tone belied his scolding words. Castiel chuckled, and Fitzgerald’s broad, friendly grin returned. His laughter boomed across the still, silent fields of white. “I got mine at SUNY Plattsburgh and trust me, that’s way more impressive than it sounds.”

“I believe you,” said Castiel around helpless laughter.

“Don’t ask, don’t ask, don’t—”

“Mr. Fizzles?” Castiel asked, resigned.

Fitzgerald was so grateful there were tears in his eyes. Pulling his hand back, he twisted his glove around to reveal two buttons placed like eyes, and he tucked the front of the mitten in between two of his fingers. What Castiel had thought were two random red lines were actually, somehow, lips. “Mr. Fizzles wants to help Mr. Shurley. Mr. Shurley seems sad!”

“Never do that again,” suggested Castiel.

“Don’t worry, I know what you mean!” said Fitzgerald.

Castiel had no idea what he meant.

Castiel had no intention of asking.

“So, the tree?” Castiel gestured toward the tree. A stiff breeze swept snow misty across their yard, made the curtain of branches sway, made the broken part of the trunk balancing atop the healthy part teeter and creek ominously.
“Ayup, the tree!”

Springing into motion again – Castiel would kill for a fraction as much energy in a day as Fitzgerald seemed to use every minute – Fitzgerald grabbed the winch chain, hustled to the trunk, and carefully walked down the length of the fallen tree, testing his footing with every step. “Here’s the plan – wrap the chain around a part right about...here!” He threw the chain around the trunk so hard that, when it looped beneath, it boomeranged into his waiting hand. “And pull this part up. See, the trunk split here.” Fitzgerald pointed at the gaping wound left where the main bole of the willow had broken in two. “If we leverage things right, we can get this part upright, and it’ll be held in place by the weight of the root network, and the broken part will fall free.” As he spoke, he pantomimed how he imagined things happening, laying his arms side by side, slowly lifting one, the other dangling beside it, then he made a *crisssssh-crash* sound and one arm went fully upright and the other fell limply to his side.

“What about the ice?” asked Castiel, pointing at where multiple thick branch were frozen into the surface of the pond.

“Eh, I don’t think it’ll be much of a problem,” Fitzgerald replied, shrugging.

“Do you ever think *anything* will be much of a problem?” Castiel countered.

“Nope – should I?” asked Fitzgerald, suddenly, inexplicably as serious as Castiel had seen him. Brought up short, Castiel could only blink.

*Should he? What’s the worst case scenario here? The angles involved mean the house is in minimal danger. If nothing is done, the tree won’t survive the winter – probably won’t survive the next storm – might not survive the week – and Dean will die. As insane as Fitzgerald’s plan sounds, if it works...*

“No, I suppose not,” said Castiel.

“I like you, Castiel,” Fitzgerald said. “Let’s be friends!” Fitzgerald stuck his hand out toward Castiel again, chain still caught between his fingers, and Castiel took it, bemused, and allowed Fitzgerald to give him an enthusiastic handshake.

“Don’t get me wrong, this isn’t the ultimate cure for all your tree woes. If we get more severe weather, it could tip again – pretty likely, seeing as we’re not yet half-through winter – I mean, pretty likely we’ll get more storms, no idea how likely it will be to tip again – but I’m thinking, when this broken part collapses—” Fitzgerald started using his arms to demonstrate again, dragging Castiel’s hand and the chain along for the ride. “—if we luck out, which I think we will, it’ll fall on the root mass and weight it down, and’ll help keep what’s left of the willow stable. When the weather warms up and the ground thaws, I can come back, we can clear away the debris and see about putting in some wires and stakes to act as stabilizers. It’ll likely be a few years ‘fore things are back to normal, and a lot longer before the tree grows back to the size it was, but...yeah. So, whatcha think, you ready to save this bad boy?”

*Is Dean a bad boy?*

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

*I...kinda...really...hope he is.*

“Oh, yeah, we’re gonna get along like a house afire,” said Fitzgerald. “Not that I’m, ya know, actually going to set your house on fire. That’d be weird.”
“I appreciate that, Mr. Fitzgerald.”

Fitzgerald froze in the act of wrapping the chain around the trunk a second time and stared at Castiel, horrified.

“What?” Castiel asked blankly.

“Garth,” he spluttered. “My name is Garth.”

“Of course, my apologies. I appreciate everything you are doing for us, Garth.”

A thumbs up, a weird clicky noise that Fitzgerald somehow made with his mouth, and a grin so wide it narrowed his eyes was Castiel’s answer.

Fitzgerald’s plan was nuts. Castiel didn’t know much about plants – only what Dean had taught him – but considering the physics of what Fitzgerald proposed suggested multiple ways things could go catastrophically wrong. Fitzgerald – no, Garth, Castiel wondered if he’d ever get used to being in a group of adults who routinely, casually called each other by their first names – was so confident, though, that Castiel grew confident as well.

Surely a merciful God wouldn’t be so cruel as to hurt Dean like this, after everything else Dean has been through?

Come on, Castiel, when was the last time you truly believed in a merciful Lord whose sheltering hand protected the worthy and punished the cruel?

It had been a long, long time since Castiel believed, but as Garth started his car, pressed down on the gas, and caused something under the hood to screech and smoke, Castiel prayed.

Please, God, if I’ve ever been your dutiful son, let Dean survive this.

Please God, let Dean’s body and heart heal.

Please God, let Dean find the love and protection and family that he deserves.

With a jolt and a horrible creak, the living section of trunk tilted upward. A shattering sound spoke to the ice giving way. Splintering cracks and a gritty scraping like coarse sandpaper over wood started softly and grew louder and louder as the surviving section of the tree leveraged up. To Castiel’s amazement, exactly as Garth’s vague gestured had suggested, the broken part fell, shearing down the side of the living trunk. For a moment, the whole ensemble teetered terrifyingly as Castiel watched, breathless, and then with a resounding crash the scene disappeared in a cloud of white. A shockwave and a mushroom cloud of loose snow knocked Castiel to his butt and when it cleared, to Castiel’s gratified joy, everything was precisely as Garth had predicted: the broken skeleton of the tree that was all that was yet attached to the roots stood, weakened, lessened, but alive, and the greater, broken trunk rested at an awkward angle on the ground, pinning the roots in place. Water burbled up where the ice had broken, and the branches that yet had shards attached to them swayed and tossed in the wind, ice tinkling like chimes as the pieces struck each other.

“Waaaaaahoooooooo!” Garth bellowed.

Castiel suspected that Garth’s uncanny enthusiasm and crazy brilliance had more to do with his plan’s success than Castiel’s prayer, but, then, what was God if not the accumulated triumphs of his greatest creation?

Thank you, Lord. I’m sorry I doubted.
“Cassie, is everything okay?”

Castiel twisted to see Jimmy standing, bleary-eyed, on the porch, shielding his face from the glare of the snow with one hand and squinting to see what had happened.

“Yes,” Castiel called back. “I really think it is, Jimmy. Or at least, I think it’s going to be.”

“Oh, awesome. I’m going back to sleep. Garth, come on in, my brother’ll make you dinner.”

“Seriously?” Garth turned the happiest puppy-dog look toward Castiel, and Castiel laughed and gestured toward the house.

“Seriously. I’ve got hamburgers.”

“Yes!” Garth fist pumped the air over his head and traipsed down the path through the snow back to the house. “Score!” Castiel followed more slowly, glancing back often at the still-swaying tree.

Thank you. Please, God, do what you can to keep Dean safe this winter – and I will do what I can. I know God helps those who help themselves, and I will do my best to deserve the blessings I’ve received.

The loose boards of the stairs creaked beneath Castiel and he lost his balance, pitched forward, and Jimmy caught him. Castiel looked up as Jimmy looked down, clear blue eyes stunning and bright on the sunny, snowy day, and Jimmy smiled.

We’ll both do what we can. Thank you for never leaving me alone, Jimmy. Thank you for being my rock, my anchor, and my love.

We’re going to be okay. We’re all going to be okay.

“Hamburgers!”

And eat hamburgers.

“He looks better,” said Jimmy, skimming a finger over Dean’s side. The only light in the living room came from the flames dancing on the logs in the fireplace, dancing to tatters in the draft down the flue. The glow painted Dean’s permanently tanned skin a rich burnished gold, glimmered orange in Jimmy’s eyes, highlighted Jimmy’s hair in a shade even Castiel, with all his knowledge of art, couldn’t put a name to. He’d never be able to replicate that color in acrylics and oils. “Don’t you think so?”

“I think he looks exactly the same,” Castiel admitted. “But I hope...” He shook his head and slumped against the floor. He hoped too many contradictory things, more than he could admit, more than he understood yet.

With both Jimmy and Dean between Castiel and the flames, he was cold except where Dean pressed hot against him. After Castiel’s realized Dean was calmest when he wasn’t alone, they’d decided to spend the night with him instead of leaving him downstairs alone. If Dean slept peacefully through the night for the first time since they brought him in the house, they’d see about hauling his bulk up the stairs. To maximize Dean’s comfort – is that the only reason? Really? – Castiel lay on one side of him, Jimmy on the other. Dean had yet to shift into the contact as he had earlier, and Castiel wondered what that meant, wondered what Jimmy was thinking, wondered what new surprises the next day would bring, and the next, and the next.
Every day since we’ve moved here has been an adventure, most of those adventures good, but some scary, and I hope...

Jimmy coughed to clear his throat. Castiel shook away his thoughts. He didn’t want to think about his hopes. He wanted to sleep, and wake up refreshed in the morning, and follow up with Sheriff Hanscum, and learn that something incriminating had been found in the Benders’ house, and be there when Dean opened his eyes, and...

...and he was thinking about his hopes again.

Another cough and a thwap to his shoulder pulled Castiel’s attention back to the moment. Jimmy lounged next to Dean, propped up high enough on an elbow that he could see over Dean’s bulk, looking at Castiel. Castiel lifted an eyebrow in a silent question.

“You know...” said Jimmy, looking away, lifting an arm to awkwardly scratch at his back. “Like, you said...about Dean...but if you were sure, and if you changed your mind...you know I want you to be happy, right, Cassie?”

“Yes, that’s what I want for you as well,” Castiel said, nodding.

“I get that, yeah, but I mean, you don’t have to sacrifice your happiness for mine...” Jimmy trailed off. Castiel waited patiently for Jimmy to continue, to explain himself, and the room was quiet save for the crackling of the wood and a hiss as the heat evaporated a wet spot from one of the logs.

There was a snap, and a burst of sparks scattered into the air and drifted down like fireworks, momentarily haloing Jimmy.

“Jimmy, I can’t read your mind. I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Castiel, lips forming a moue of frustration at the continued silence.

“I’m talking about Dean.” Jimmy’s voice rose, with anger or passion or worry or something, Castiel wasn’t sure, and Castiel blinked, stunned. “You...earlier today, you suggested you loved him.”

“I do...yes, I think I do,” admitted Castiel.

“God, you make it hard for a bastard to be self-sacrificing,” Jimmy groaned, flopping onto the ground on Dean’s other side. Even more confused, Castiel sat up and looked down at his brother. “Cassie, what I’m...I’m trying to say that if you’d rather be with Dean than with me, I’d be cool with that – I mean, I wouldn’t be, like, cool-cool with it, I’d miss you like crazy, and be jealous as sin, but knowing you were happy would be enough for me, and—”

“It wouldn’t be,” Castiel interrupted more harshly than he meant to.

“Huh?”

“It wouldn’t be enough for me, to know you were happier without me,” Castiel clarified. “I concur with your assessment of me – my feelings for Dean are clearly more profound than I’d realized when we spoke about this yesterday, but they’re still not more profound than my feelings for you. I see no reason to ever tell Dean my feelings, not when I’m already with you. I don’t need anyone but you.” The longer Castiel spoke, the more Jimmy got a pensive, considering look in his eye, though the expression was made lurid by the light of the fire. “I know I’ve been...difficult...at times, but I have another appointment with Dr. Moseley tomorrow. I’m not ready to give up on what we have, no matter how wrong I sometimes worry it is. You mean too much to me, Jimmy. But if you want to end things—”
“No!” exclaimed Jimmy, sitting up. “I definitely, definitely do not want to end things with you. Ever. I’d fucking marry you if I could.” Castiel’s brain shorted out. Jimmy continued to speak, but the words were meaningless. “I just wanted to be sure you realized...you understood...you’re not trapped, you—”

“Did you just propose to me?” asked Castiel breathlessly.

“Wait, what?”

“Azrael James Shurley, did you just ask me to marry you?” Castiel demanded.

“You swore that I’d never have to hear that name again after our parents died!” Jimmy exclaimed, rolling away. Dean made a solid obstacle between them. “But I kinda guess that, uh, sure,” Jimmy mumbled. “I kinda did. Yeah. If you want to. I mean, we can’t actually. But. Um.”

“Ring.”

Jimmy twisted back around and stared at Castiel, wide-eyed and stunned and stunning. “You’re serious?”

“How does that song go?” Castiel smirked. “If you like it than you’d better put a ring on it?”

“Something like that,” Jimmy muttered. “You’re serious. God, Cassie, sometimes I think I’m crazy and then you say shit like that and I realize...I don’t even know. Of course I’ll buy you a fucking ring, if you want. I’ll buy you a whole handful of rings.”

“No, just one,” said Castiel with a grin. “Lapis, I think...”

“I don’t know what that is,” Jimmy admitted.

“It’s the rarest blue pigment used in Medieval and Renaissance paintings, and the only shade I can think of that could replicate your eyes,” Castiel explained.

“Sounds expensive...not that you’re not worth it, but...”

Castiel laughed. “In the Middle Ages, we’d have bankrupted ourselves to get enough for a single painting. These days an inset ring’ll run around $50.”

“Tell me why you know that...no, wait, don’t, I don’t want to know...”

“I was thinking about trying to make traditional ultramarine pigment a few years ago – remember when I was planning that altar piece because I thought if I turned to religious art, mother and father would approve? – but I decided it wasn’t worth the effort, and then our parents nixed the idea anyway.” said Castiel. “As part of that I looked up how much the stones cost.”

“Lapis it is.” Jimmy’s smile was gentle, affectionate, and it was all Castiel could do not to flop to Dean’s other side and lay atop his gorgeous brother and kiss him senseless. “Hmm...what should mine be?...”

“Anything you’d like,” promised Castiel.


“The Hope Diamond it is, then,” Castiel replied solemnly. “Though you know, I hear it’s cursed, and it might get pricy – you might have to give me a lifetime to save up and convince the museum to sell it.”
“Right, right, I forgot about the curse, damn…” Lifting a hand to his forehead, Jimmy made a mock woe is me gesture, thunking his head against the floor by accident. “Well, there’s no other stone worthy of adorning my perfection. I guess I’ll have to do without.”

Disappointment quelled Castiel’s warm happiness, more powerfully than he’d expected, and he slumped back to the floor, staring up at the ceiling.

“Anything you’d like,” he repeated.

“Ya know, sometimes you…” Jimmy trailed off. Castiel couldn’t bring himself to look, though he heard sounds that spoke, unmistakably, to Jimmy moving. Jimmy’s face popped into view, inverted, blocking Castiel’s view of the ceiling. “Sometimes I forget how damn literally you take things, and I hurt you, and I feel like a total asshole.” Jimmy’s lips hovered over Castiel’s forehead, their faces so close that Castiel’s view of Jimmy was broken and disjointed, his eyes unable to focus correctly.

“That’s because you are a total asshole,” muttered Castiel. “If you don’t want a ring, you could just say you don’t want a ring…”

“I want a ring,” Jimmy breathed, kissing Castiel. Pleasure and heat returned; Castiel reached up, cupped Jimmy’s cheek, and tugged their faces together. He focused on their kiss, prolonged it, deepened it. Jimmy’s tongue slipped into Castiel’s mouth and they both sighed happily. “I want you, all of you, and I want that symbol on my hand that means that, even if no one else realizes it, I’m yours. Let them wonder who gave me the ring. Let them wonder who put that secretive smile on my face, and that hickey on your neck…” Jimmy licked a line down Castiel’s face, over his Adam’s apple, nudged his shirt aside and sucked a bruise into his shoulder. Castiel shuddered and arched off the ground, pain and pleasure flickering through him in equal measure.

“We’ll know the truth. You’ll know how hard I get for you. I’ll know the lingering taste of your come in my mouth.”

Reaching out, Jimmy rucked Castiel’s shirt up and nipped at random over his torso. Castiel strained toward Jimmy’s mouth, his cock hardening to tent his pajama bottoms, even as the reality of their situation intruded on his awareness.

“What about him?” scoffed Jimmy, nuzzling at the waistband of Castiel’s pants. “He’s a vegetable – maybe literally – and even if he weren’t, even if he were sitting here awake watching, do you think he’d mind? Didn’t he push you to confess your feelings to me?” With a snap, the elastic stretched, tugged, rubbed rough over Castiel’s cock, then freed him to the cool air made warm by every breath rushing from Jimmy’s mouth. “Didn’t he suggest this? Didn’t he encourage you? Whaddaya think he was thinking about when he said those things?”

“His…” Castiel gasped as Jimmy sucked the head of Castiel’s cock into his mouth. “His brother!” he managed in strangled tones. “He was thinking about his brother! He was in love with…he was intimate with his brother.” Through the cloth of his jeans, Jimmy’s erection bumped against Castiel’s nose, and despite his embarrassment…

…because of his embarrassment?...

…Castiel shifted his head so he could mouth at Jimmy through the fabric. Jimmy sighed an appreciative sound, drawing away to lick at the thin liquid that leaked from Castiel.
God, that’s gross, and hot. I want Jimmy to suck me clean. I want Jimmy to never stop. I want this so badly and there’s nothing wrong with that.

What if Dean sees? What if he wakes up? What would he think? Would he be disgusted? Angry? Would he feel violated that we’d been intimate inches away from him?

“Clueless, Cassie,” Jimmy breathed. With heat jumbling his mind, for a moment Castiel thought Jimmy was answering his thoughts, and then Castiel recalled what he’d said about Dean’s feelings for Sam.

“No, he definitely—”

“Once upon a time,” Jimmy agreed, licking up the side of Castiel’s dick, back down the other side, as if Castiel was the flap on an envelope.

That’s…the least hot comparison ever. Way to go, Castiel.

True though.

And it feels so good, who cares?

“I’ve watched you two together,” said Jimmy. “Thought about coming out to join you so—” Jimmy sucked one of Castiel’s testicles into his mouth. Castiel gasped, accidentally bucked up from the floor, accidentally sucked the head of Jimmy’s clothed cock into his mouth, and nearly gagged as cotton lint coated his mouth. Gasping, Castiel flopped back to the ground. “—many—” Releasing one testicle, Jimmy nipped at Castiel’s other and Castiel yelped, teeth snapping shut dangerously close to Jimmy’s dick. “—times. But Dean didn’t want to meet me, and you deserved a…friend…of your own, no matter how jealous your relationship made me, so I minded my own business.” Shifting his hips, Jimmy aligned his cock with Castiel’s mouth once more, unerringly though Castiel couldn’t imagine how Jimmy knew where to place himself, and pushed against Castiel’s lips until Castiel opened his mouth and let Jimmy in. “God I love your lips. Your lips were made for fucking, Cas. You don’t know how many times I thought about doin’ this…” Jimmy enveloped Castiel’s dick, slid wetly down the length, and pushed himself into Castiel’s mouth. Prepared this time, Castiel didn’t gag, but he was surprised to realize that he wished there was no barrier between them, wished to pull Jimmy’s cock from within Jimmy’s pants.

But he hasn’t been cleaned up…

…if I’m going to be filthy, it’s going to be for him.

“And you’d better believe Dean has thought about fuckin’ your mouth, too,” Jimmy added, bobbing up for air, leaning back down to suck at Castiel again.

“You don’t know that,” Castiel said, taking his lips from the fabric. Lifting his arms, he slipped them beneath Jimmy’s shirt and rubbed up his torso encouragingly, mapping the perfect contours of Jimmy’s muscled chest.

Jimmy’s sinful chuckle ghosted sensation over Castiel’s cock, ghosted sensation through his body, and Castiel’s eyes slid shut in bliss. Vision was irrelevant; there was nothing to see save the plaid pattern of Jimmy’s pants and the bulge made by his cock.

I can’t wait to suck him down…

…wow. I mean that, I really mean that. Though it’s taken us time and patience and experimentation I can’t wait to get my lips around my brother’s cock.
I wonder what would happen if Dean saw? I wonder if our parents are looking down at us from heaven?

The thought sent a jolt of searing pleasure through Castiel, infinitely eclipsing his shame.

Would they be surprised? Scandalized? Or did they secretly think we would always up intimate? Or that we already had been intimate? God knows they did everything they could to bring this end about. They had us share a room and a bed for years, kept us from making friends with the locals, isolated us even when we were home in the States. Did they secretly hope for this, that their perfect angelic choir boys would go down on each other in the dark of the night? Or would they think we were filthy and disown us because it somehow never crossed their minds that by keeping us forever together, forever apart from others, they guaranteed that we’d have no frame of reference for desire save each other?

Each additional thought sent further bliss through Castiel, like every vein and artery was electrified, his body lit from the inside like an angel’s.

If God didn’t want us to enjoy this he’d not make it pleasurable. I refuse to buy into the fallacy that God is so shallow and so petty that he’d dangle this rapture before us like a carrot before an obstinate mule, tempting us and ultimately denying us or expecting us to deny ourselves. There are so many better ways to test our faith. No, this is our reward, the wonder of life that makes the suffering worthwhile.

Unable, unwilling, to stop himself, Castiel thrust up into Jimmy’s mouth every time Jimmy dipped down. A telltale hitch to Jimmy’s movement hinted to Castiel that Jimmy was about to pull away to speak again; taking that as his cue, Castiel slid his hands rapidly, roughly down Jimmy’s torso, jerked Jimmy’s pants out of the way, grabbed Jimmy’s bare hips, opened his mouth wide, and pulled Jimmy down into his mouth. Jimmy arched back, leaving cooling saliva to ooze down Castiel’s dick, and groaned.

“Fucking hell, Cas!”

More like heaven.

Humming approval, Castiel took Jimmy as deep as he was able – not very, granted, but better than he’d been able to do at first. Unwashed, Jimmy’s cock was musky, strangely tangy, and there was an intoxicating natural aroma to Jimmy’s genitals and pubic area that revolted and aroused Castiel. Desperate for more of the heady scent, he inhaled deeply, and Jimmy groaned again, dropped back down, and sucked Castiel’s dick back into his mouth. Sensation exploded through Castiel – settled his stomach, abolished disgust, suffused him with ecstasy. Wrapping one arm around Jimmy’s butt, laying the other hot and supportive along Jimmy’s spine, Castiel focused on using his limited skills to make his brother feel as good as Jimmy made him feel, focused on not losing himself completely in the glorious feel of Jimmy’s expert mouth around him.

Castiel couldn’t have said how much time passed, couldn’t have said from one moment to the next how he used his tongue, how Jimmy used his tongue, or how often Castiel swallowed to clear Jimmy’s early release from his mouth. There was nothing but the feel of his brother hovering hot and close over him and around him, nothing but the weight of Jimmy’s dick in his mouth and the faint, needy, aroused sounds that Jimmy licked and sucked against Castiel’s shaft. Pleasure suffused Castiel, pushed him higher and higher. Despite Dean beside them, a constant threat of discovery hovering inches away, Castiel felt better than he ever had.

Really? Despite Dean’s presence? Or because of Dean’s presence?
Weight fell across Castiel’s chest.

Both Jimmy’s arms were occupied, supporting his weight; his legs were splayed on either side of Castiel’s head, awkwardly angled as Jimmy strained to control himself. Sweat pooled where Castiel’s arms encircled Jimmy’s hips.

Dean’s awake. Dean’s seen us. Dean knows.

*And his reaction is to hold me.*

With a moan that choked around Jimmy’s thick cock, Castiel came. Jimmy made a garbled noise and rocked his hips desperately down, down, pulled out, and splattered Castiel’s face with gobs of semen. Bliss rocked Castiel, rocked his body against the floor, rocked his cock in Jimmy’s mouth, rocked his chest against the heavy weight of Dean’s arm. It was long moments before his breathing calmed, his heartbeat slowed; he felt pressed down, like in his bliss he’d been floating on the ceiling and now he was flat, heavy, solid, in the best possible way.

*If I could spend the rest of my life with Jimmy…*

*…and Dean…*

*…atop me, I think I’d be happy. Happier than I ever imagined I’d get the chance to be.*

*Do I get to have both of them?*

*I guess it’ll be up to Jimmy, and, whenever he wakes up, Dean…but I hope…*

“See…what I mean…?” managed Jimmy around heavy breathing.

“No,” Castiel replied. Come dripped into his mouth, and Castiel was surprised that he didn’t find it nearly so gross as he had previously.

*I’m getting used to this.*

He felt an inexplicable twang of disappointment, followed by a surge of pleasure and relief. Dr. Mosely had Castiel pegged when she said that Castiel was aroused by the shame and humiliation he felt, aroused by how he found Jimmy’s come disgusting yet still *craved* it, aroused by the secrets that they kept, aroused by knowing, in his heart, how utterly improper and *wrong* their relationship was yet how *right* it felt. If he’d grown used to the flavor of Jimmy’s come, what else might he grow used to?

“Wow, Cassie, you’re *gone*,” laughed Jimmy. “I know you didn’t hear me – did you even notice that your boy Dean likes you so much that he reached out for you while he was unconscious?”

“He’s still out?” asked Castiel, surprised. Jimmy nodded and rolled to one side with a satisfied sigh. Castiel tried to rise, but Dean’s fingers curled more tightly around his side, and Castiel twisted to see Dean’s eyes still shut, skin still sallow, belly still sunken as if with hunger. Though unconscious, Dean’s arm shifted with Castiel’s movement and pulled him closer, held him more tightly, and Castiel gave up trying to shimmy away. He could swear he felt Dean ease against his back.

“Ya know, I’ve heard plants’ll grow in toward the sound of the voice of someone they like,” said Jimmy with another laugh, circling around to Dean’s other side once more and curling up.

“I’m pretty sure that’s a myth,” Castiel replied. Dean’s weight against his back felt good, and
proper, and a moment later Jimmy’s hand reached over to cup Castiel’s side and he felt even better – safe, protected, and cared for.

“You mean NatGeo lied to me?” Jimmy demanded, scandalized.

“We can ask Dean when he wakes up,” said Castiel.

“I like that plan,” said Jimmy, voice already going vague with sleepiness. “Believe me I plan to talk to Dean a whole lot when he wakes up.”
Chapter 15

Dean didn’t hallucinate or wake up delirious when they spent the night with him. While one night’s experiment didn’t constitute proof, Castiel and Jimmy decided to take it as such. Castiel’s back would never forgive him if he spent another minute asleep on the hard wood floor beside the fireplace. Working in tandem, it took Jimmy and Castiel nearly an hour to get Dean up the stairs, hauling him up one laborious step at a time, but they stalled in the hallway at the top of the staircase.

“We...shoulda...figured out...where we were taking him...before...hauling him upstairs,” Jimmy huffed around panting breaths.

Slumping against the wall, Castiel slid to the floor, legs curled up before him at awkward angles because of where Dean lay and the narrowness of the hallway.

“My bed is only a double,” Castiel pointed out.

“Shit,” muttered Jimmy, sliding down the wall opposite Castiel and tangling their legs together, their knees bridging over Dean’s still torso. Castiel looked a question at him. “Getting him into the middle of my bed is going to be an unbelievable PITA.”

Castiel frowned. “I’m not clear what flat bread has to do with—” With an incredulous snort, Jimmy threw his head back and laughed uproariously. “—and that wasn’t me attempting to be funny, I genuinely don’t understand. Yes, there are challenges involved in hoisting Dean into place, but I do believe it would be most comfortable situation for him. He seems happy and—” A new peal of laughter reduced Jimmy to helpless tears; he knocked his head against the wall and slapped his knee with one hand, using the other to clutch at his chest. “What?”

“PITA means pain in the ass,” gasped Jimmy.

Castiel’s frown deepened, though it was increasingly an act. He loved how delighted Jimmy was. “Is this like the time you tried to make ‘a sap’ the pronunciation for A-S-A-P?”

“You’re a sap!” countered Jimmy, giggling maniacally.

“And you’re a pita, with hummus;” Castiel deadpanned in reply. “Red pepper hummus.”

Jimmy cracked, howling with laughter.

It was a long time before they got Dean set up in Jimmy’s bed, but it was a lot more fun than getting him up the stairs had been.

After the excitement of the storm, the days that followed were anticlimactic. As January slid, frozen, into an equally frigid February, hours flowed into weeks as each storm flowed into the next with scarce a break in between. Fatigue and pain knocked them both flat the first few days, but after that life returned to a shocking semblance of normality.

Castiel drew and painted.

Jimmy wrote.
Dean lay unconscious on Jimmy’s bed.

Every night, Castiel and Jimmy curled up with him. Who was in the middle changed frequently. Sometimes, Dean would roll over and embrace Castiel. Sometimes, both twins would lie holding Dean. Sometimes, Castiel would walk by the door to the bedroom on his way to the studio and hear Jimmy’s lovely, low, melodic voice reciting a couplet or speaking to Dean conversationally, as if Dean could hear him.

“Well, they say that visiting coma patients and talking to them can help them recover,” Jimmy explained with a shrug when Castiel asked why. “I figure, it can’t hurt. Don’t tell me that’s a myth like that plant thing was.”

“I have no idea,” Castiel admitted. “But if you think it might help Dean recover...”

That afternoon, Castiel finished the painting he was working on, took it into the bedroom, sat on the edge of the bed and described in detail what he’d made. Dean didn’t react, and initially Castiel felt a fool, but the longer he spoke, the more comfortable he felt, and by the end the only awkward aspect was that Dean was still unconscious. For one, painful moment, as he’d set the painting aside and looked up hopefully, Castiel had dared to hope that Dean would be awake, but there was no change in his condition.

Stupidly optimistic. Some savior complex ya got going on there, Cassie boy.

His shame didn’t stop him from going back the next day, and the next, sometimes going in directly after Jimmy and sharing a secretive, special smile with his brother. As helpless as Castiel felt faced with Dean’s persistent vegetative state, at least talking to Dean felt like he was doing something, and helped pass the endless, dark winter days.

According to Jody, Sheriff Hanscum’s investigation was proceeding but Jody knew little and she shared less, small town gossip that was often contradictory suggesting on the one hand that the matter was over and done and on the other that arrests were imminent.

Supposedly, two FBI Agents had come into town. Supposedly, their names were Victor Henriksen and Calvin Reidy. Supposedly, an analysis of the shotgun had turned up something pretty interesting – not a match to the buckshot, which was untraceable, Jody said as if everyone knew that – but the shell casings showed similarities to those found at crime scenes throughout the Adirondacks, down the Appalachians and all the way south to the Blue Mountains. Supposedly, every case linked to the shotgun was an unsolved murder. Supposedly, it was common knowledge that the Benders would occasionally take a beat up old RV and go hunting. Apparently, they could be traced to the vicinity of at least two of the crime scenes. Apparently, Sheriff Hanscum was angling for a commendation for her preliminary work, because without her diligence the case would never have come to the Agents’ attention. Apparently, Sheriff Kontos thought the whole thing bunk and spent a lot of time at the Downtown Diner grousing to anyone who’d listen about how he was being treated like a pariah at his own precinct and being edged out of his own investigation, not that he thought there should be any investigation to speak of. Apparently, Sheriff Kontos insisted, everyone knew the Benders were weird but harmless old country coots.

Eventually, a call from the Sheriff herself established that, while she wasn’t authorized to talk publicly about the case, the local authorities had ceded jurisdiction to the FBI agents and the likelihood of Jimmy’s being called on again was minimal. If necessary, the police could use the Jimmy’s open-and-shut assault case to prevent the Benders fleeing, but there was a preponderance of evidence tying them to at least four murders in three states, so there was little need to book them for attempted assault with a deadly weapon. As quickly as excitement had come to their lives, it passed them by.
And good riddance to that kind of excitement!

When Castiel thought what might have happened, he felt ill, and could only pray thanks that his brother was healthy and his best friend was...

...something. Not dead. Castiel wasn’t sure what was wrong with Dean or if he’d recover, but he felt confident avowing that Dean was alive.

After every storm, they got a cheerful call from Garth asking how their tree was doing, and Castiel was perpetually pleased to report that the willow remained as well as could be expected. The sheered wood, bared when the trunk broke, had been pale at first, but it grew darker as it was exposed to the elements. The tree remained quiescent and leafless as it ought, but it sustained no further damage and Castiel was optimistic that the danger to Dean was past.

The mystery was, why didn’t Dean wake up?

“But,” Jimmy pointed out philosophically one day when Castiel felt particularly low about his friend’s continued illness, “didn’t you say he looked ill before the willow was damaged? Maybe this is just how he spends winter! The pond freezes over, the grass goes brown, the tree sheds leaves, and Dean hibernates like a bear.”

“I thought ‘bears’ were larger and hairier,” Castiel replied. Jimmy looked at him incredulously. “Bears have beards and mustaches, right? And wear a lot of flannel?”

Jimmy’s laughter was an ever-refreshing balm to Castiel’s soul.

Castiel hoped Jimmy was right about Dean.

Given how awkwardly...and how frequently...they had sex in the bedroom while Dean was on the bed, it would be extremely embarrassing if Dean woke up unexpectedly.

Especially because sometimes Dean rolled toward Castiel and snuggled him close, but increasingly of late, Dean rolled toward Jimmy, and held Jimmy close instead. The shift in Dean’s behavior made Castiel simultaneously so optimistic and so jealous that he couldn’t bring himself to talk about it.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Additional warnings for this chapter:
1. rape mention (no one is raped - this is the chapter where the "mildly dubious consent" tag comes into play.)
2. graphic description of vomiting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Oh, Jimmy...”

“Yeah, Cas, it’s okay – it’s good – I know you’re uncomfortable but I swear I won’t hurt you. This won’t hurt a bit,” said Jimmy soothingly, running one hand down Castiel’s side as he slid a second lubricated finger into Castiel’s hole. Castiel gasped, eyes flying open though he could see nothing.

“What are you—” With a hiss, Castiel’s mouth snapped shut as one of Jimmy’s nails flicked over his prostate and there ceased to be room in his head for anything other than good and more.

“Just like we discussed...” Jimmy’s voice was reassuring, but Castiel couldn’t remember what they’d discussed, couldn’t hold on to anything. Ashamed of how stimulated he was, how distracted pleasure made him, how quickly he lost the thread of reality when Jimmy touched him, Castiel nodded agreement rather than admit how oblivious bliss made him. “Good, good, I think you’re just about ready...”

Jimmy lay atop him, hips tucked between Castiel’s legs, cock aligned with Castiel’s perineum.

Oh, intercrural sex. This is fine. This is familiar.

“Ready, Cassie?” Jimmy asked with a dominant, possessive grin that alarmed Castiel.

No, don’t worry. It’s Jimmy, he’d never—

The blunt head of Jimmy’s cock pressed against Castiel’s hole.

“Stop!”

“Cas?”

“Stop! Stop! Please—”

“Yo, Cas, sorry man, I didn’t mean to...shit, breathe, breathe, you’re okay!”

Castiel jerked awake gasping, tried to roll away from the hard body beside him, but couldn’t. The grip on his arm was too strong, and, still panicked from his dream, he pulled back and nearly tumbled from the bed.

That was just a dream. Jimmy and I have talked about anal. He knows I don’t want to – knows I’m not interested, regardless of which of us does the insertion and which of us is inserted into. He wouldn’t...he would never...why is he holding my arm? Why can’t I move? Why am I—?
“Damn, this is awkward,” muttered...

...not Jimmy.

“Dean?” Castiel breathed, scarce daring to hope.

“Hey, Cas,” said Dean. In the darkness, Castiel could scarce make out the contour of Dean’s face, the outline of Dean’s body beneath the blankets. Dean’s eyes cast faint, deep green light that made Dean look sickly – more sickly than usual – and might be the most beautiful thing that Castiel had ever seen.

Even more beautiful than Jimmy?

On the other side of the bed, Jimmy mumbled something, rolled over, seized considerably more than his share of the blankets, and didn’t wake up.

God, no, I could never pick. Please don’t ask me to pick.

“You, uh, you seemed...not okay,” Dean explained. He released Castiel’s arm and pulled his hand away, shying from Castiel, putting a thin, vast chasm of cool air between them where they’d previously been pressed together. Castiel repressed a whimper.
But what Dean is doing is the correct course of action. We should never have been so close. I should never have allowed myself to grow accustomed to having him beside me. He's been unconscious...he's not seen me in months. He has no idea what happened, no idea what Jimmy and I have discussed. He's not seen me since I told him Jimmy and I were an item. That was...that was four months ago. Wow.

“And I was worried – worried about you and about, ya know, what the fuck was going on and why I was in bed with you,” continued Dean in a rush after a moment’s hesitation. “I didn’t...I can’t believe I’d...?”

“I’m not sure what you’re afraid you did,” admitted Castiel, “but allow me to assure you that you’ve done nothing untoward.”

“‘Untoward?’” Dean imitated, shaking his head. Strands of hair, grown long though Castiel had scarce noticed until now, swept over his forehead and caught the light of Dean’s eyes oddly. “Aw, fuck, did I pass out and wake up in a Jane Austen novel? Quick – quick – say something X-rated. Offer me a beer. Anything.”

Castiel frowned. “You can drink beer?”

Absolute silence filled the room as loudly as the clanging of a church bell.

Dean blinked. The glow from his face vanished, plunged the space between them into darkness, then returned, seeming brighter for its brief absence.

“It’s dark,” muttered Dean. “I’m in a bed – in your house?” Castiel nodded. “And my eyes...shit. Cas, I...I can explain.”

“Only if you wish to,” said Castiel with a shrug.

“No – no, hear me out, it’s not what you think—”

“Dean,” Castiel interrupted. “Don’t be scared of me, or Jimmy. We’re not going to hurt you. We’d never hurt you.”

“Study me, then?” asked Dean suspiciously. A sneering twist of his lips looked cruel by the eerie light. “Mark me Specimen 1, put me in a museum, display me like a freak? Ma said that’s what happened to one of her uncles, until they carried him too far from home and he died. P.T. Barnum himself apparently lamented the loss of such a prize show piece.”

“God, you didn’t tell me he was an idiot,” groaned Jimmy, rolling abruptly into a sitting position and pulling the blankets completely off Castiel. “Seriously, Cassie, I expected better.”

“You must be Jimmy,” Dean replied sourly.

“Nuh-uh, it is too dark and too fucking late – sorry, early – to have this conversation,” Jimmy said. “Take your moron outside for this chat or, better yet, both of you go back to sleep and we’ll sort this shit out in the morning.”

“Fricken...fine, but I’m turning the light on.” Jimmy’s announcement gave barely enough warning for Castiel to squeeze his eyes shut before the normally dim light flared unreasonably bright to his dark-accustomed eyes. Beside him, Dean squawked and shifted, the bed bouncing under his
weight. “I’m going to make coffee,” Jimmy said petulantly. “You two...try not to make out or anything while I’m gone, will ya?”

Jimmy left.

In a lifetime of awkward silences, Castiel thought the one that followed Jimmy’s departure might take the cake. Worried about Dean, especially concerned with Dean’s right to dignity, and safety, and a sense of personal security, Castiel rolled to the edge of the bed and sat cross-legged facing Dean. Dean yet pressing his face against a pillow, warily blinking and twisting to check if his eyes had grown used to the light yet.

“You’re free to go any time,” Castiel explained. “We haven’t imprisoned you. We’ve told no one about what happened to you save the one person we had cause to think already knew about your nature. I swear, Dean, we’d never knowingly seek to hurt you.”

Wary, Dean sat up, still blinking against the lamp, mouthing a word that Castiel thought might be knowingly. Jimmy had walked off with the blanket, and Castiel breathed a sigh of relief that they’d thought to clothe Dean. All the ways they’d violated Dean’s privacy would have to, in time, be shared – the sooner the better – and the consequences of those violations faced, but at least initially, the safer Dean felt, the easier this conversation would be.

“Do you remember what happened?” asked Castiel.

“No, I—”

“Dean, do you drink coffee?” Jimmy startled them both by interrupting, sticking his head in the room, the blankets making a mantle about his shoulder and a flowing cape down his back.

“No,” said Dean.

“Do you drink anything?” asked Jimmy.

“No,” Dean admitted, scowling. “Look, I should go.”

“Dean, please wait, we—” Castiel cut off, took a shaky breath, and tried again. “If that’s what you want, I won’t stop you.”

Shifting, Dean crawled toward the edge of the bed, the slats supporting the mattress creaking with every movement. Setting his feet under him, Dean stood, the bed rebounded at finally being free of Dean’s weight, and Dean collapsed with a crash.

“Dean!”

“Fuck...”

Castiel threw himself across the bed in time to see Dean get a hand under himself and twist into a seated position with his back against the wall.

“Are you alright?” asked Castiel.


“It’s late February,” Castiel said. “In early January we got hit by a bad storm – a blizzard, wind gusts topping out around 80 mph according to the National Weather Service—”

“You looked up what the National Weather Service said about the storm?” Dean interjected.
“Why?”

“Do you want to know what happened or not?” replied Castiel snippily. Dean chuckled, then his mouth snapped shut, he scowled, and he made an impatient gesture for Castiel to continue. As if he remembered he’s supposed to be angry with me. Oh, Dean, I’m sorry. I hope you’ll understand why we did what we did...maybe you’ll forgive me, forgive us, some day... “We got about three feet of snow, on top of the four feet we already had, with drifts even taller. About halfway through, y—” Castiel bit the word off, eyed Dean, and continued, “about halfway through the storm, the main bole of the willow tree broke, the root structure ripped free of the ground, and the tree toppled into the pond.”

Dean froze, eyes wide and unblinking.

Now that he’s awake, he blinks and his chest rises and falls as if he’s breathing. I wonder if I’d feel a pulse if I touched his arm? It must be an illusion, a fabulous, intricate, purely magical, laws-of-physics-defying illusion. What a breathtaking creature he is.

“No,” Dean breathed.

“It’s true,” said Castiel sadly. “I know that...” Jody said he’s not the tree. “I mean, I suspect that...but—”

“No, that’s not what happened,” said Dean. “I remember...I remember a little. But...the willow...it hit the pond. That’s good. That’s damn good. And it’s not dead...” Looking up through his eyelashes – how did I never notice how long they are? – Dean caught Castiel’s eye, flinched, and looked away again. “What do you think you know?” he asked, resigned.

“I think...I thought you were the willow tree, a...dryad or some such, I suppose...but Jody said you’re not the tree?”

“Oh!” Dean exclaimed. “You’ve been talking to Jody? I thought you meant...but it doesn’t matter I guess. I...” Dean’s lips twisted into a grimace. “I...”

“No matter what I’ve surmised, true or false, you never need to tell me anything you’re uncomfortable sharing,” said Castiel. Dean clamped his mouth shut, grimace deepening. “You thought I’d spoke to Mr. Bender about you?”

“Yeah,” muttered Dean. “But shoulda realized that’s...I mean, if you had I’d be...”

“It’s not as simple as that,” Castiel said. “At first we didn’t realize there was any connection between you and the tree. We found you, apparently uninjured but unconscious, in the trench dug out when the roots tore free of the ground. Bringing you into the house made it clear you weren’t...I mean...”

“I’m not human, Cas,” said Dean bluntly. “It’s obvious you know, and you can’t believe I don’t know, so quit beating around the bush.”

“Was that a plant joke from the plant man?” said Jimmy, sidestepping into the room holding a steaming cup of coffee. The bitter-sweet smell of brewed beans tickled unpleasantly at Castiel’s nose.

“Ha. Ha. Ha.” Dean scowled at Jimmy. “Haven’t heard that one a billion times before.”

“What, did every single algae cell in the pond say it to you?”
“You never mentioned your brother was a comedian,” said Dean, turning his scowling to Castiel.

“You’d have known if you’d ever agreed to meet him,” Castiel countered, looking down his nose at Dean until Dean had the grace to acknowledge the point by looking away. “So, as I was saying – we knew you weren’t human but didn’t realize there was more to it than that. To our unprofessional eyes, the tree appeared badly damaged. We called around to hire a tree removal service but they were all booked with emergency jobs; since the willow hadn’t struck the house or taken down any infrastructure, the companies deemed our job low risk and wouldn’t come.”

“Cassie’s leaving out the part where he didn’t want the tree to die because he knew it was special to you,” said Jimmy. Surprised, Dean looked to Castiel, who shrugged and wished Jimmy hadn’t brought it up. “We thought part of the tree could be saved, but not with the damaged part weighing on it.”

“As Jimmy says,” Castiel nodded to his brother. “So we called the only other people we knew who could deal with a tree.”

“The Benders,” snarled Dean, eyes flashing.

“The Benders,” Castiel confirmed. “It wasn’t until they started cutting the tree down and you started screaming that we realized that you and the tree were linked or...whatever you are.”

“And no matter how many times Cassie says you don’t have to tell us shit – which is true, but you know that, you could squash us like bugs, you won’t put up with anything we do that pisses you off unless you want to – crap, I lost the thread there. Basically: not gonna lie, I’ve got a zillion questions I’d like answered. I’m dying of curiosity,” said Jimmy brightly, sitting down carefully so as not to spill his coffee, blowing ineffectually at the steam drifting off the surface.

“Dying, huh? You look healthy enough,” Dean sniffed but one half of his lips twitched as if he were fighting not to smile. “Insensitive to us maybe-dying folks, to joke ‘bout that.” Jimmy opened his mouth to quip back but Dean continued, “But what happened? Obviously, they didn’t cut down the willow – if they had...”

“You’d be dead.”

“Yup.”

“That’s what I figured,” said Castiel. “Jimmy stopped them, with an assist from Jody.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that,” Jimmy said thoughtfully. “I mean, yeah, I stuck my ass in the line of fire and nearly got shot for my trouble but there were three of them and if that shotgun hadn’t magicked up another shot, nothing I did woulda mattered worth a damn.”

“Did you do that, Dean?” Castiel asked.

“Do what?”

“Jared Bender pulled a shotgun on Jimmy and fired both shots at him,” Castiel explained. “When Jimmy wrested it away from them, he was able to fire it a third time even though it was only double barreled.”

“Fuck, no, I can’t do anything like that,” said Dean. “I...” He trailed off, looked from one brother to the other, and sighed, slumping back against the wall with a loud thunk. Loose plaster rattled and whispered as it fell within the wall like falling rain. “Sorry.”
“Don’t tell us anything—”

“Shove it, Cas, I know,” Dean interrupted, sounding exhausted. “You’ve been...I mean, I wanted to tell you, but after Sam...I wish you’d known my brother. He’d’a liked you two. He was always sayin’ we should give people a chance, even though Ma had always said to watch out, and Bobby would go all gruff, like, ‘some ya can trust but ya gotta keep both eyes on most a’ us human-like idjits.’ When Sam died he took the best part of me with ‘im, and I swore – never again. But when I heard that bitch of an inspector tell you to cut the tree down...I just had to go and open my big mouth.”

“Are you sorry you did?”

“Honestly?” Dean side-eyed Castiel without lifting his head. “Some days I ain’t sure. You’re...” He shook his head.

“Cassie’s pretty awesome, isn’t he?” Jimmy said warmly. Surprised Castiel looked to his brother, but Jimmy’s attention was on Dean. “Best part is how he doesn’t even realize it. When he’s interested in something he’ll get this gleam in his eye and this breathy note in his voice and next thing I know he’s saying something so astute I can’t keep up, and then he’ll turn around and say I’m the smart one. The modesty is what kills me.”

Both turned to Castiel with matching appreciative looks, broken only when Jimmy raised his mug to take a drink of coffee.

“Stop that,” said Castiel more harshly than he meant to. Dean half-smiled, and when Jimmy lowered his mug, his smile was nearly identical. “I’m not...this isn’t...why are we talking about me? Dean – after we chased the Benders off, we spoke with Jody and she recommended we call a friend of hers, weird guy named Garth, and he was able to knock loose the damaged part of the tree and get the main trunk upright again.”

“I’ll have to send him a fruit basket,” said Dean, but he still had that secretive, private expression gracing his lips.

Castiel longed to kiss the look off his face.

Wrong answer, Castiel.

“More plant puns?” exclaimed Jimmy, laughing. “Dude, you’re a fucking tree, how do you have a better sense of humor than this stick in the mud?” Jimmy stuck a thumb out toward Castiel.

“I thought I was the funniest angel in the garrison, Azrael,” Castiel countered.

“Hey, gimme some credit – this tree has a GED and a ‘give ‘um hell’ attitude.” Dean grinned. “But to be clear...I’m not exactly a tree.” He paused, waited, gave them each a look, then sighed.

“You’re not going to ask, are you?” Castiel shook his head.

“Nope,” said Jimmy, taking another sip of coffee.

“I’m a golem,” Dean explained. “So was Sam. And Ma. Don’t think Pop was, given that all we know ‘bout him is that his pollen blew into Ma’s catkin and really, you don’t want to know the details of what passes for willow tree sex, but the point is, all of Ma’s family was like this – like she and I and Sammy. When we were seedlings, she took care of us, and when we were big enough...well, it’s complicated, and pretty fuckin’ personal, but basically, I’m...carved...from the wood of that willow down by the water, and Sam was carved from the other tree, and if I die, the tree dies, and if the tree dies, I die, so basically, your buddy Garth saved my life. Hence, fruit
basket. Unless you think he’d prefer a decorative carving? Sounds like I’ll have a shit-ton of wood to work with. How much of the trunk broke off?”

“About two thirds,” Castiel explained.

“Ouch,” Dean muttered, shaking his head. “I’m gonna have a rough summer.”

Silence fell, broken only by an owl hooting somewhere in the distance, coming steadily closer between each call. Jimmy sipped his coffee, Dean stared at his hands, and Castiel wondered if it would be polite to excuse himself to use the bathroom. Dean had opened up more than Castiel had expected, more than Castiel would have asked Dean to, but all their conversation did was spawn more questions. There was still so much that had happened that Dean didn’t know about, about the Benders, about Jody and Sheriff Hanscum and Garth, but there would be time to tell him everything.

I hope there will be time...I hope...

“So, uh, nothing in your story explains why I woke up as the middle spoon...” Dean’s gesture took in the two twins, the unmade bed, the curtains, and the pile of dirty laundry that it was definitely Jimmy’s turn to put down the laundry chute.

“Right.” Jimmy huffed out a breath and hid his face behind his coffee cup. “‘bout that…”

“Is this some weird…fuck, I don’t even know what kind of…necrophilia? Dendrophilia? I mean I get you guys are all kinds of gay for each other – or at least that was my understanding last time I spoke to Cas…?” Dean hesitated until Castiel and Jimmy exchanged a glance and nodded.

All kinds of gay? How many kinds of gay are there?

“. . .but puttin’ me in the middle of that sandwich takes lovin’ wood to a whole ‘nother level,” Dean concluded.

“It’s not…” Castiel couldn’t meet Dean’s eyes, couldn’t lie to his face, especially not given some of the thoughts he’d had the past few weeks, and especially not considering how many times he and Jimmy had tacitly violated Dean by engaging in relations in his presence.

Heck, he was involved, sometimes...

...God, how could I? We didn’t have his consent. We didn’t ask permission. I got come on his face once. Jimmy rubbed his butt back against Dean’s leg while thrusting in my thighs. We used him like a...a...sex toy.

It was practically rape.

And I got off on it.

Bile rose in Castiel’s thought, and the urge to flee to the bathroom – to urinate, to vomit, to lock the door and hide – rose.

“Woah, you know I was mostly kidding, right? But the way you’re avoidin’ the question is kinda freakin’ me out,” said Dean. “I mean, the ‘humping my leg’ thing that woke me up was a little creepy but who hasn’t woken up with morning wood—” Jimmy choked on a laugh, and Dean smirked. “—like, I get it, it happens, but...what is this?”

“Cassie, you were humping his leg?” asked Jimmy.
“I…” Swallowing back vomit, Castiel looked a plea at Jimmy.

We assumed so much. I told myself what we did wasn’t dirty, wasn’t twisted, didn’t make me broken, because Jimmy consented, because we talked it through, because he wanted what I wanted.

But I was right – I was right all along – what we did with Dean was so wrong. How can I even…

“Excuse me,” Castiel croaked. He put a hand over his mouth, stumbled to his feet, and sprinted to the bathroom, jerking the door shut behind him. Falling to his knees before the toilet, he coughed up spit.

Twisted.

Castiel’s stomach heaved.

Disgusting.

Acid burned his throat.

Rapist.

The remnants of dinner – scarce recognizable, semi-digested and disgusting – filled his mouth with a vile flavor of bile and mustard.

You’re a rapist, Cassie.

Coughing, Castiel retched into the toilet.

And you claim you love Dean?

Every condemning thought brought up more vomit, until Castiel’s stomach roiled and twisted and knotted on nothing.

Do we violate the people we love?

There was nothing left in him but saliva and yellow gunk that burned up his esophagus, but he couldn’t stop gagging.

Do we lie to them?

Tears filled Castiel’s eyes, from the coughing, from his guilt, from how utterly and willfully he’d deceived himself into the belief that his behavior was justified and justifiable.

Do we run away from them?

This was the price of Castiel’s hope.

Jimmy and Dr. Moseley are as twisted as I am. They tried to tell me that how I am is fine. They claimed this wasn’t a sickness. We’re all going straight to hell, the way sure enough paved with selfish, delusionally ‘good’ intentions.

This was what came of letting his darkest secret come to light.

No! Jimmy didn’t…if we’re damned, it’s my fault. Jimmy followed along because he cared for me. I’m to blame.
Nausea wracked him.

It’s my fault.

Heaving, he tried to empty himself again, but he couldn’t.

There’s nothing more to empty. I’m already completely hollow. I—

There was a knock on the door. Castiel tried to gasp out a protest but his throat burned and no sound came out. Another knock rattled as he scrambled for a semblance of self-control, and then—

“Cas?”

It had never crossed Castiel’s mind that Dean would be the one to come check on him.

“Uh…you okay in there?”

This is the last time I’ll hear him sound so concerned, so invested, so caring. When he knows the truth…

“Fine,” Castiel croaked.

The silence managed to convey a horrifying amount of disbelief and condemnation.

“Jimmy told me what happened.” Dean spoke loudly so as to be heard through the door, and Castiel wondered if the bathroom towels were thick enough that, if wrapped around his head, they’d drown out what Dean said. Dean’s voice was lovely, gruff and low, so different from Jimmy’s yet no less like a balm to Castiel’s troubled soul.

Castiel’s troubled soul didn’t deserve the least balm.

“He didn’t,” Castiel said.

“She?…” he drawled Dean.

It’s already too late. He already knows.

Don’t delude yourself, Castiel, it was too late the day you met Dean. It’s been too late since the moment I was born mere minutes after the most perfect person I’ve ever met. From conception it was too late for me.

“So I was ripping up your living room – sorry ‘bout the coffee table – and it turns out ‘snuggling’ made it better?” Dean said. “Good to know, I guess. Only person I’ve ever shared a bed with was Sam, so. Yeah. Anyway, uh. I don’t mind. The snuggling. Or you touching me. Or you knowin’ ‘bout me. I’m sorry I was kind of a…utter and total asshole…when I woke you up but I don’t usually come out of hibernation so early and I never wake up from winter anywhere but, ya know, in a fucking tree, so it was really fricken weird to wake up with you just right there and smellin’ so good and thinkin’ and rubbin’ your damn dick against my leg and you know what I’m gonna shut up. Now. Right now.”

He doesn’t know.

Castiel coughed up more thick yellow that seared his throat, blew out his taste buds, and he gagged on how gross it tasted, how gross he tasted.

How gross I am...
“Fuck,” Dean said so softly Castiel wasn’t sure he’d heard correctly. There was an unidentifiable noise like the rush of wind, a tap, and then, “I can’t…through the door…Cas, can I come in there?”

Castiel’s stomach roiled.

“Please? I’m not sure what freaked you out so bad, but I’m not mad, okay? I’m not gonna get mad. I, uh, I think you’re pretty awesome. Closest thing I’ve had to family since Sam died. I don’t wanna lose that – don’t wanna lose you – over a misunderstanding. I mean, not that I have you, but…”

“Would you want me?” Castiel’s voice sounded as broken as he felt, and was likely unintelligible.

_How dare I presume..._

“I’m coming in, ‘kay?” said Dean. Castiel nodded, but the door didn’t open and Dean didn’t enter. Something in Castiel broke and a sob ripped from his scorched throat. “Cas…come on, man, talk to me. How am I supposed to know what the problem is if you won’t use your words? I’m a fuckin’ animate chunk of wood, I don’t know fuck-all ‘bout this touchy feely human shit.” There was a slamming sound and another whispering rush of sifting plaster, and Dean muttered something, the only word of which Castiel could make out was Sam.

_He’s hurting too. He’s thinking about Sam – missing Sam – and I’m making it worse and..._

_...and how much worse will the truth make it?_

_Anything is better than how I feel right now._

“Come in, Dean,” said Castiel, suddenly exhausted. Weighted down by guilt, he curled his arms on the toilet bowl and lay his head stop them, realized how rank it smelled, reached out and flushed. The door handle clicked as Dean turned it, the door opened, and Dean stepped in.

Walking still seemed to trouble Dean; he swayed unsteadily even over the scant distance between the door and where Castiel knelt. When Dean dropped to his knees beside Castiel, Castiel wasn’t certain if it was intentional or if he was incapable of standing longer. Despite his weakness, despite his hollow cheeks and sickly appearance, despite his inhumanly gleaming eyes, Dean was still one of the most beautiful people – the most beautiful creatures – that Castiel had ever seen. Had Dean been the lowest leper, the most scarred warrior, the most unspeakable beast of the depths, Castiel couldn’t imagine that opinion changing; Dean’s beauty radiated from within, from his passion and his righteousness and his pure soul and his protectiveness of those he cared about.

And _Castiel_, filthy, corrupt, contagious Castiel, had despoiled that perfection.

Castiel squeezed his eyes shut.

He couldn’t bear to look at Dean.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“For what?” asked Dean. “I can tell you’re upset but I don’t get why. What’s going on in that gorgeous head of yours?” Stunned, Castiel lifted his head and blinked at Dean. “What?” Shaking his head, Castiel slumped back down. There were no words. There would never be enough words for Castiel to explain himself, or enough ways for Castiel to apologize. A frustrated scowl passed over Dean’s face, then he shrugged it away, dropped his shoulders, made himself look smaller than he was, and said, “May I touch you?”
Consent, Castiel. That’s called asking permission. Remember, that thing I couldn’t be bothered to pursue before grinding my wood against his leg?

Another sob shook Castiel, clenched agony in his chest, as the inescapable craving to feel Dean’s hand on him met with how profoundly unworthy he felt.

I can’t let him. I can’t let this contagion spread.

But I want him to touch me, want him to embrace me like he did so often while insensible.

And we’re back to that consent thing that I so clearly have no actual grasp of.

“Why?” asked Castiel hoarsely.

“Huh?” Dean blinked.

“Why do you…why would you want to touch me?” The words came out dripping venom, all the spite Castiel felt for himself leaking free. Dean settled back on his heels, shifting him farther from Castiel, with a surprised, hurt expression.

“Oh,” he said flatly. He paused, gave a single jerky nodded, and repeated, “Oh. Sorry. My bad…I thought…but no, of course not, you have Jimmy and a humiliation kink a mountain wide. Asleep, I’m a fetish, but awake I’m just that guy who is way too into plants. I should have…” He shook his head, put his hands on the floor, and forced himself upright as Castiel watched, too amazed to interrupt. “Fuck me for getting my hopes up. You’d think after the number of times my life has gone to shit just when I thought things might finally suck less, I’d have learned to expect this but no, still a fucking chump, still fall for it every fucking time.” Scarce halfway to his full height, Dean’s supporting leg went out from under him and he fell back to one knee so heavily that the porcelain toilet shook and the tub buzzed. Muttering under his breath, he started to rise again.

He knows.

He actually knows.

Jimmy actually told him.

God, my brother is fucking insane, what was he thinking?

But…

But…

“Wait,” Castiel managed. Dean froze in an awkward position, lost his balance, and tumbled back onto his butt. The toilet shook again, and somewhere nearby, something that probably shouldn’t crack, cracked. Castiel would worry what later. “You know about…on the bed…when you were there…?” Disjointed, shattered, scatterbrained, coherence was not Castiel’s strong suit but at least he was talking.

“What part of Jimmy told me what happened didn’t get through to you?” said Dean incredulously. “Like, I get that you don’t trust me, I’m the bizarre dude who randomly ambushes you in your own backyard and then disappears again. If I were you I sure as shit wouldn’t give me the time of day – I’d have set the dogs loose, pulled out the shotguns, heck, laid down the fucking salt lines…”

“Salt lines?”
“They keep away demons,” Dean said idly as if it were the most obvious yet irrelevant thing in the world. “So, yeah, mistrust me? Hell to the h-e-double-hockey-sticks yeah. But you don’t even trust Jimmy? You think he’d lie to me and then let me come over here and try to comfort you, while I was deluded into thinkin’ I knew the truth? That’d be one heck of a mindfuck on both of us. He doesn’t seem the type.”

“No,” said Castiel faintly, trying and failing to swallow back the revolting taste in his mouth. “He’s not the type.”

“I’m the type.

I’d do that.

“Right, so, I know about the sex next to me in bed,” said Dean, ticking off points on his fingers. “And I know about my weird-ass habit of rolling into the middle of it, and I know about you two talking to my comatose ass, and I know that you had me stripped buck-ass naked for a while as a way to keep me warm. Did I miss anything?” Castiel shook his head. “Am I uncomfortable? Okay, yeah, maybe a bit, but who the fuck wouldn’t be? But am I offended? Upset? No. You and your brother saved my life at least three times over. And…” He huffed out a breath. “Like I said, you’re the closest thing I’ve got to family. I’d die for you, Cas. I…” His cheeks flushed – how? Dean has no blood – and he stared at the back of his own hand, four fingers raised to represent the four things Jimmy had told him. “Fuck it. It doesn’t matter.” He flexed his hand and let it drop.

“It does!” Castiel burst out. I want to touch you. I want to kiss you. I want to be allowed to want you. Did Jimmy tell you that? Did Jimmy tell you he and I are engaged? Did Jimmy tell you that I love you?

Dean looked up at him, startled gaze bright. “You matter.”

I wouldn’t be this upset if you didn’t matter so. damn. much. And again, doesn’t that go to show what a cruel imitation of a good man I am? If I was actually good, you’d matter because you are alive, regardless of how personally important you are to me. But there’s no comparison between the abstract ‘everyone matters’ nonsense we all pay lip service to and how much you, Dean Winchester, sitting before me and looking so uncertain and exasperated and hopeful and worried actually matter to me.

Why can’t I say any of that aloud?

His mouth, his brain, his body, refused to cooperate.

Coughing to clear his throat, Castiel reached out toward Dean, whose gaze flicked between watching Castiel’s hand and looking worriedly at Castiel’s face. His brow was furrowed, eyes sad, mouth compressed in a thin line.

“May I touch you, Dean?”

“Yeah…yeah, sure,” breathed Dean.

The tip of Castiel’s finger brushed over the line of Dean’s jaw and he gasped – they both gasped – as Castiel traced the contours of Dean’s face, the cleft of his chin, the rise beneath his lip, the smile lines incised deep on each side of his mouth, the strangely delicate curve of his nose, the ridge of his cheekbones that subtly, perfectly drew attention to his lovely eyes. So many times while Dean had been unconscious, Castiel had explored, had felt along Dean’s arms, his legs, his face, and thought he’d known what Dean’s skin felt like. Comparing that to what he felt now was like seeing a winter-bare tree and discovering the same tree six months later bedecked in the green finery of summer. What Castiel had touched was the golem, cloaked in the thinnest illusion of life. Awake,
Dean was alive, his skin soft with an underlying hardness, warm, and vibrant. His nose flared with every inhale – each faster than the last as Castiel continued his tentative touches – and his mouth huffed humid air onto Castiel’s hand. All was illusion, must be illusion, but oh, what an astonishing illusion Dean’s appearance was.

“Wow…” Castiel whispered.

“Cas…what are you…?” A helpless hitch in Dean’s throat left Castiel aching to know what Dean was thinking, how Dean was interpreting Castiel’s behavior.

*Probably incorrectly, because I’ve communicated nothing with him.*

“You’re the most beautiful person, Dean – inside and out, the most remarkable, intelligent, fascinating, breathtaking man I’ve ever met,” breathed Castiel. Dean’s eyes went wider at every word, green growing brighter, more verdant, more magical. “Still think Jimmy told you everything?”

“Does he know?” mumbled Dean. “That, um, that you think that? ‘Bout me?” Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes and sparkled like emeralds. Tentatively, carefully telegraphing every movement, Castiel swept his thumb beneath Dean’s eyes and wiped the moisture away.

“Yeah, he knows,” Castiel replied, smiling. The disgusting flavor of vomit yet coated his mouth, but the sick feeling in his stomach dissipated, replaced by the flutter of uncertain yet hopeful butterflies. “Heck, sometimes he even encouraged me. And, uh, he thinks you…for some reason he’s got it in his head that you feel the same way about me that I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me, Cas? What was this whole…meltdown…about? You know it fuckin’ reeks in here, right?” Dean’s voice was weak, the questions coming one on top of the previous. “You—”

“Don’t be scared,” Castiel said solemnly with a steadiness that was only skin deep.

“But—”

“Trust me, I’m terrified enough for the both of us.” Castiel laughed hollowly. “It’s so wrong of me to say I care for you when I also care for my brother. Loving him has been a…a struggle for me…my therapist says I’ve internalized a lot of hatred, a lot of false religious strictures, that my parents taught me, even though I don’t actually believe any of it. Like, if someone else came to me and described a situation similar to mine I would – I know I…I hope I’d…” He took a deep breath that rasped painfully over his throat, filled his nose with noxious fumes, and he tried again. “I’d be supportive. I hope I’d be supportive of someone else in my position but when it’s me—”

Shrugging, Castiel dropped his hand to his lap. Dean stared at it, blinked, then reached out and took hold of him, threading their fingers together.

“You’re a fuckin’ idiot, Cas,” said Dean fondly. A shocked laugh burst from Castiel. “Man, you cannot believe how fuckin’ scared I was to tell you ‘bout me and Sam. I kept droppin’ hints but I couldn’t tell if you were missin’ ‘um or just didn’t give a shit. Then there was how you talked ‘bout Jimmy – like, that seemed way above and beyond brotherly but how could I be sure? People can get a smidge sensitive about, ya know, brother-fuckin’ incest. But you were catchin’ the hints all along, right? It was that you truly didn’t mind…”

“I truly don’t mind,” Castiel agreed. “And I’m profoundly sorry for what happened to Sam, what happened to you. Like I said…when I’m talking about someone else I can see, clearly, all the ways there is nothing objectively wrong with incestuous love between consenting adult family members.
I understand that homosexuality is not a sin, and I’m sure love is not a sin. While I’m firmly agnostic, if there were a God in the Christian sense I could not believe there to be sin involved in something that brings those involved so much joy. But applying that to myself…” He sighed. “And my love for you complicates matters further. I struggle to believe that my feelings for Jimmy are pure and proper and right. That I…what?”

Dean goggled at him.

“What, Dean?”

“The hell you say?” stammered Dean.

“Now he gets it. He thought I meant I loved him instead of Jimmy. I’ve inadvertently clarified that I love him as well as Jimmy, and he understands now as he didn’t before how twisted I am, how selfish, how—

“You…you love me…?”

Castiel flushed, the butterflies in his stomach morphing into demons that kicked and punched and roiled through him. A rise of gas brought an agonizing burp up his throat and he fell back from Dean, leaned over the toilet in case he couldn’t stop himself from throwing up again.

“Cas…wha…?”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel croaked. “I shouldn’t…”

“Shouldn’t what? Love me? Tell me? Why the fuck not?” demanded Dean. “You are the most fuckin’ confusing…words, Cas!”

The order, so similar to what Jimmy always said to him, snapped Castiel back into the moment, back into awareness of the coping strategies that Dr. Moseley had taught him, that his brother had helped reinforce over the past few months.

“There’s nothing wrong with the way I am. “I’m sorry, Dean.” Castiel managed a ragged breath. As long as I’m honest, as long as I do my best to understand myself, and make myself understood to the people I care about, I’m not selfish. “It…it incapacitates me to think that I love both of you.” They can’t help me if they don’t understand. “I want to be with Jimmy, more than anything, except…except maybe not more than I want to be with you.” If I speak up, even should the worst happens, the outcome will still be better than if I say nothing. “I need you, Dean, and I need him, and I understand how unfair that is to both of you.”

Though I damn myself for eternity, I want both of you, and God or Lucifer help and defend me if I’m forced to pick.

“Why?” Dean asked. A burst of anger surprised Castiel, and he stared frustration and confusion at Dean’s baffled countenance. “Sorry, that was, uh, ambiguous of me. Why do you think that’s unfair?”

Castiel was so astonished that all he could do was blink. The demons pummeling his stomach froze, and he nearly choked on an unexpectedly free, clear, easy deep breath. “Because…”

Why do I think that’s unfair?

“Listen, Cas, there’s a world of difference between feelings and actions. Your brother…” He shook his head. “Look, I dunno what’s going on between you and I, and you and he, and…frankly, dude,
whatever is going on between he and I is fuckin’ weird, like…I met him an hour ago? But I feel like…not that I know him…but he’s comfortable – familiar, like you are. And it’s not that he’s similar to you ‘cause – trust me – he’s not. You two feel completely different.” Dean shook his head again. *Feel different? What does that mean?* “Hell, fuck if I know, but—”

“You two having a good chat in here?” Jimmy interrupted. Castiel and Dean both looked up to find him leaning languidly against the door frame.

“We’re making progress, after a fashion,” said Castiel, giving Dean an uncertain look to confirm that Dean agreed. Dean nodded.

“I figured you must be,” Jimmy said sagely. They both stared at him. “What?” They continued to stare at him. “Aw, come on, don’t give me the silent treatment – ask!” Castiel curled his lips into a pouty, overstated frown. “Fine, fine – God, I knew Cassie was no fucking fun but I expected better of you, Dean. Come on…” With a gesture inviting them to follow him, Jimmy turned down the hallway. Castiel needed a white-knuckled grip on the toilet bowl to get himself upright, and only as he stepped over Dean and started after Jimmy did he realize that Dean had yet to get his feet under him. Turning back, he squatted beside Dean and offered a hand.

“Jimmy is lying,” Castiel deadpanned. “Either to you or to me. Because he has assured me that I am *very* fun when we’re *fucking.*”

Dean’s laughter started as a startled snort, grew quickly into a full-bellied guffaw that buoyed him to his feet. Jimmy greeted them in the hall with a quirked eyebrow that caused Dean to laugh harder, using a hand against the wall to steady himself. Leading the way, Jimmy pointed to the window.

“Well?”

Dean and Castiel couldn’t fit through the doorway side by side; Castiel let Dean go first, lingering in the hallway. From where he stood, all Castiel could see was precisely what he expected to see: dawn spreading limpid light over the winter morning, the valley of the pond a smooth glimmering white as flawless as a porcelain bowl, snow so deep the reeds scarce peeked their heads through, and the trees beyond like black skeletons silhouetted against the sky. Dean stepped closer and turned away, grimacing.

“Fuck,” Dean muttered. “Sorry ‘bout that. Not something I have much control of.”

“What?” asked Castiel.

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Come on over, bro…”

Wondering what further unpleasantness awaited him – please *let the willow be alright, please* – Castiel stepped closer to the window, widening his view, enabling him to see the willow, standing straight and tall as it had since Garth’s emergency aid, and the large area of bared dirt and ice that Castiel and Jimmy had kept dug clear all winter just in case and…

In a world made white and brown and gray and black by winter, seeing green outside was like a glimpse of Eden. Temperatures had scarce risen above freezing, even in direct sunlight, in months, and crystals rimed the bared dirt, patches of snow filling divots and making miniature dunes around the bared ring surrounding the willow and the dead bulk of tree lying beside it. And everywhere there was exposed earth, everywhere the snow was thin, surrounding the tree trunk, the roots, the fallen trunk, was rich, vibrant, deep green adorned with uncountable white flowers. Awed, Castiel stared, raising one hand to the window. Condensation spread wet over the glass where he touched.
“Snowdrops,” said Dean, sounding mortified at the beauty he had inadvertently spawned.

“A symbol of hope and consolation,” added Jimmy. “You two got anything to tell me?”

“I love you,” said Castiel, turning solemnly to Jimmy. “And I love you,” he continued, meeting Dean’s eyes.

*Dean’s irises are the same color as the snowdrop leaves.*

“I, uh…” Dean leaned against the wall, fumbling uncomfortably at his hair. “Cas is great. Not having him ‘round would fricken suck. And Jimmy, you seem cool too, sorry I was a PITA about meetin’ ya. I’ve—”

“Ah ha!” crowed Jimmy. “See, see?” Dean looked confusion at him.

“I suppose you’re right,” Castiel said, sighing.

“I don’t suppose shit,” said Dean angrily. “Here I am being all thoughtful, and, what, not even gonna share? Whaddaya take me for, a blockhead?”

Jimmy groaned. “Aw, fuck, you didn’t warn me about the wood puns, Cas.”

“Are botany jokes superior or inferior to hummus jokes?” asked Castiel with a philosophical air.

“Ugh, is this because I said ‘PITA’?” Dean covered his eyes with the hand he’d been mussing his hair with. “Cause seriously that was *not* one of my finer moments and I am *never* saying that again.”

“I told you that you wouldn’t be able to make flatbread a thing,” Castiel said to Jimmy.

“No, no, yokes on you, Cas – I’ve never said PITA to Dean – he got there *all on his own* which means that flatbread is *already* a thing!” Jimmy looked to Dean for support.

“No, it’s not,” said Castiel.

“It’s really, really not,” Dean agreed. Jimmy scowled. “Listen…what I was trying to say—”

“I’m not a PITA, you’re a PITA,” grumbled Jimmy.

“Fuckin’…Cas, your brother is an asshole, but I kinda like him anyway, and I bet he’ll grow on me —”

“Really, Dean, more plant puns?”

“—as I get to know him and *no* I didn’t mean it as a pun so fuck you too, Cas.”

“Perhaps we should consider grafting Jimmy on to you instead?” said Castiel thoughtfully.

“So, wait, do you want to fuck my brother or don’t you?” Jimmy demanded.

“You two are gonna fuckin’ kill me,” Dean groaned.

“I thought we saved his life – doesn’t sound so grateful anymore, does he?”

“No, Jimmy, he seems surprisingly frustrated.”

“Well, perhaps we should leave him to it.”
“Good plan.”

“We still got shit to talk about, guys—”

“No, Dean, I draw the line at learning about animal feces.”

“Scat play is on my ‘red light’ list.”

“I have no idea what that means, Jimmy.”

“Don’t worry, Cassie, all you need to understand is that incest and dendrophilia are both on my ‘green light’ list.”

“I still have no idea what that means.”

“It means your brother is a kinky fuck, Cas…”

“Like you’ll ever get to find out!”

Laughing, Jimmy grabbed Castiel’s arm and dragged him from the room while Dean stammered behind them.

“Oh, yeah, I think this is gonna work out great,” Jimmy murmured reassuringly in Castiel’s ear.

“I didn’t want you and he to meet because I was afraid that you’d fall for him and I’d lose both of you,” admitted Castiel.

“There are loads of things you should worry about, brother, but I’m gonna go out on a limb and say that ain’t one of them,” Jimmy beamed triumph at his joke.

“I heard that!” shouted Dean in mock fury. “You’re both assholes.”

“In your dreams, Deanie boy!”

“I love you both so much it drives me nuts,” said Castiel. There was a beat pause, then Jimmy cackled. “That…wasn’t supposed to be a plant pun.”

“I know, but it was anyway, and it was amazing,” gasped Jimmy. “Dean, I’m gonna go make breakfast.”

“I don’t eat!”

“Well, come photosynthesize with us or something! We’ll install a sunlamp in the kitchen with our next advance so you can eat with us!”

“But I…you…” The sound of Dean’s spluttering protests grew softer as Jimmy and Castiel reached the end of the hallway and started down the stairs. “Fine! But I hate you!”

“We know!” Both brothers called back, and Castiel didn’t need a mirror to know that the happy excitement brightening Jimmy’s cheeks and bringing a sparkle to Jimmy’s eyes was identical to Castiel’s enthusiasm. They’d always been reflections of each other, either identical or complimentary. Castiel had known that, feared its ramifications as regarded Dean, but laughing his way down the stairs arm and arm with his brother, the love of his life, his fiancé, Castiel realized he’d badly misjudged things.

*There’s nothing wrong or dirty or selfish about this if we all want it, right?*
Jimmy and Dean don’t know each other well.

But they’ll come to in time.

And then…

Castiel’s mouth still tasted horrid, but a mug of Jimmy’s coffee, sweetened and lightened, would wash that away. Dean was awake, and happy. Jimmy was with him, and happy. The backyard was awash with snowdrops, awash with hope. The joy suffusing each of them, suffusing the house, suffusing the grounds, was infectious, and Castiel let it suffuse him, let it quell the last of his nerves.

Loud steps behind them spoke to Dean making his heavy way down the hall. He caught up with them as they reached the base of the stairs. Castiel expected more joking, maybe some devilish groaner of a pun, but instead, Dean wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders.

“You’re awesome,” he said sheepishly. “You’re both…really awesome. Thank you.”

Thank you, Jimmy. Thank you, Dean.

I’m so glad that, whatever this is, we’re in it together.

Chapter End Notes

Plants mentioned in this chapter:

Snowdrop: consolation, hope.
“Oh…oooooh,” Castiel sighed, going limp against the bed, as Jimmy slid a lubricated finger into him. Growling approvingly, Jimmy laved over the hollow at the base of Castiel’s neck. With Dean in their lives, in the bed, it had been weeks since they’d had time to fully appreciate each other, weeks since Castiel had enjoyed a sexual encounter not tinged with guilt, and now that they had leisure, every touch was fantastic. No clothes separated them, no distance, no misunderstandings; Jimmy lay atop him, their cocks lined up, one hand supporting Castiel’s head, the other perfectly breaching him, wonderfully stretching him.

Dean was out seeing to the willow.

*I don’t think we’re there yet,* he’d said awkwardly. *You boys have fun. Try not to break the bed.*

Castiel wished he’d stayed.

“What’re you thinking about, Cassie?” Jimmy’s voice was low, musical and smooth. Pressure on Castiel’s prostate interrupted him before he could formulate an answer; all he managed was a groan as he pressed his head back against Jimmy’s supporting hand. The bed was warm and plush and supportive beneath them, a perfect mirror of Jimmy warm and plush and supportive above him. “You know, I’m pretty sure he’s got wood for you.”

Castiel’s groan had *nothing* to do with Jimmy’s finger rubbing inside him, nor Jimmy’s hips gently rutting their erections together. “No more—” He gasped, pleasure temporarily blinding him. “No more tree jokes!”

“I’ve only just begun to pun,” vowed Jimmy. “But seriously, can you imagine? Doesn’t need to breathe, doesn’t need to eat…don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it, Cassie…”

“I have!” Castiel gasped again.

Unbidden, his imagination formed images to match Jimmy’s words, to match the things he’d thought about since Dean had woken up the previous month. Dean no longer shared a bed with them – some nights he slept in Castiel’s room, some nights he returned to the willow and slept outside – but every day his health improved, every day spring came closer, every day moisture on the wind promised warmer weather. The snowdrops continued to bloom, more sprouting all the time, and yesterday Castiel had noticed other flowers as well, little ones shaped like cups in blue and purple and yellow and white, pale purple flowers with fuzzy white-and-yellow centers, and clusters of blossoms whose three lobed crimson petals mirrored the three lobed leaves that encircled the stem beneath. When Castiel had asked, Dean had identified them as crocuses, liverleaf, and trillium, and while he complained that the crocuses were invasive, unusually, he made little effort to uproot them.

*Crocuses symbolize childlike delight, preciousness, cheerfulness, and new beginnings,* Jimmy had pointed out that night. Apparently, he’d learned about flower meanings as part of writing their fantastical garden books, and now every time Dean mentioned a new one, Jimmy whipped out his phone and shared what he’d learned.

There was a high degree of correlation between the flower meanings and Dean’s moods. Looking
up the symbolism felt increasingly invasive.

*Do they bloom because Dean is thinking of me? Does he not uproot the crocuses because he understands these hidden meanings? Or does he leave them because I foolishly said how much I liked them before asking if they were a native plant?*

“Do you think about his fingers in you?” whispered Jimmy. Jimmy drew out most of the way and pressed the tip of a second finger against Castiel’s hole. With a soft moan, Castiel spread his legs wider in invitation.

“*Yes!*”

“What about…his lips?” Jimmy breathed the words in between kisses as he slid back up Castiel’s neck and brought their lips together, slowly stretched Castiel wide as Jimmy buried his fingers knuckle-deep in Castiel’s body. “Do you think about his lips on yours?” Castiel nodded frantically, raising his hips to better accommodate Jimmy. “*Words, brother…*”

“I bet…they’re rough…” Castiel managed, kissing Jimmy desperately. “Like his skin…chapped from…from the wind…”

*Jimmy is fantastic…*

*…makes me feel so good…*

*…but he’s too assured by half…*

Rocking his hips against Jimmy’s hand, Castiel lifted an arm, ran his nails teasingly, ticklingly down Jimmy’s side, kneading at firm muscle and soft belly fat with his thumb.

“I think so too,” said Jimmy. “I think—”

Castiel wrapped his hand around both their cocks.

Jimmy choked off a swear word and dropped the pretense of self-control. Jimmy was no less desperate for Castiel than Castiel was for him, and with their lips pressed close, every breath bringing their chests together, both their cocks stroked by Castiel’s hand, there was no more room for words. There was only passion, pleasure, and love.

*But imagine if Dean did join us…*

Moaning, Castiel worked feverishly. Ungainly, uncoordinated, he could scarce manage a rhythm that thrust Jimmy against his prostate while also kissing, while also stroking. Pleased noises rumbled through Jimmy’s chest, vibrated through Castiel’s lips, and Castiel didn’t bother trying to inhibit the needy sounds that tinged every breath he took.

Something clattered – Jimmy had probably knocked his cell phone of the nightstand like he somehow managed to do almost every damn time they had sex and—

“Oh.”

Dean.

Dean’s voice.

Dean’s gorgeous green eyes, on them.
Dean’s lips on mine, on my nipples, on my cock. Dean’s hands on my skin. Dean’s voice in my ear. Jimmy’s voice in the other ear, both touching me, touching each other, me touching both of them...

With a gasp, Castiel’s back arched from the bed and he came. Enraptured, it was all he could do not to clench his fist around Jimmy’s sensitive cock, clench his ass around Jimmy’s fingers. Jimmy made a strangled sound and thrust into Castiel’s palm. He no longer tried to kiss Castiel; he pressed their sweaty foreheads together and worked his hips against Castiel’s hand, with Castiel’s come smoothing the way.

That’s so…astonishingly…fantastically…filthy…

Castiel groaned, another surge of pleasure dazzling him, another spurt of come making his grip slick and sticky. Jimmy swore softly, “shit, shit, shit,” thrusting in time to his exclamations. Breathing hard, Castiel forced his eyes open, blinked strands of Jimmy’s hair from his eyes, and turned toward the doorway.

Dean stood framed by the jamb, wood the exact tone as his hair, staring at them with flushed cheeks. The winter gear Castiel had gifted Dean hadn’t survived the mud and ice of the storm, and Castiel had no idea where Dean had gotten the black t-shirt, blue jeans, and flannel button up he now wore. It was, he realized, the same outfit that Dean had worn throughout the previous summer.

Magic!

He giggled.

Dean’s eyes widened.

So green. So incredibly green. I tried to imagine them but there’s no reference in my memory, no color I’ve seen or dreamt of or painted with, that can replicate that shade.

“Like what you see?” asked Castiel, disoriented to find that he felt simultaneously brazen and coy and modest.

“Yes…” Dean replied hoarsely. He licked his lips, glanced down the hallway, looked back to them. Castiel’s view bounced with every thrust of Jimmy’s hips. “You two are really…yeah…”

“Shoulda…taken us up…on the offer…to stay…” gasped Jimmy.

“Next time?” Dean suggested hesitantly.

Eyes rolling closed, head lolling back, Jimmy came with a slack-mouthed groan.

“Holy fuck,” whispered Dean.

Laughing, Jimmy rolled off Castiel, whose hand fell limply away. With Jimmy’s hand no longer within him, he felt empty, and the sense of absence left him unsatisfied in a way he wasn’t accustomed to. Orgasms were usually so gratifying, so all encompassing, but something was missing.

No.

Someone was missing.

And he’s staring at me right now with impossible green eyes and the most adorably bemused
“I should, uh…” Dean looked down the hall as if toward an escape route.

“Bull,” said Jimmy. His chest yet heaved post-orgasm, jostling the bed, and residual beads of come pearled white at the tip of his cock.

*Dean is watching. I should…I should cover us with the blankets, be modest, be proper. He said he wasn’t ready, said he’d rather wait, and I should respect that.*

*But he doesn’t look like he wants to leave.*

*And all I want to do is…*

Shocking even himself, Castiel surged across the bed and licked the come from Jimmy’s cock. Jimmy gasped and moaned. A choked noise came from Dean. With months of experience sucking his brother’s cock, the flavor had grown familiar, welcome if not pleasant, but there was a tang today that Castiel didn’t recognize. Confused, he sampled more, licked along Jimmy’s softening shaft. It was pungent, bitter, disgusting in a way distinct from the usual way Jimmy’s come was disgusting.

*My come.*

*That’s my come.*

Castiel’s eyes rolled back as a blissful mixture of embarrassment, disgust and ecstasy jolted through Castiel unexpectedly. Taking a deep breath and holding it, he drew as much of Jimmy’s cock into his mouth as he could.

“Fuck…fuck, Cas…you keep that up and…” Jimmy rolled his hips, reached between his legs, brushed Castiel’s face, massaged his testicles. “Fuck, gimme ten minutes and I’ll be…Dean, what happened to ‘next time?’” Carefully easing partway off Jimmy’s cock – enough that he could breathe, enough that he could look toward the doorway – Castiel saw Dean edging out of view down the hallway.

Their eyes met.

Dean went still – incredibly still – his chest didn’t rise and fall, his eyes didn’t blink, and they stared at each other so long that Castiel’s eyes burned and his lungs protested Jimmy’s limp cock obstructing his air ways.

“Wow, you two – eyefucking much?” Jimmy laughed. “This is worse than anything I saw ya doin’ last summer.” Castiel thought Jimmy was attempting to break the tension, but Castiel couldn’t laugh along with his brother. Dean was too…too…Dean was too *Dean*. Eyes stinging with dryness, Castiel blinked and Jimmy’s cock slid out from between his lips. Jimmy *tsked* an unhappy noise and lifted his hips suggestively, smearing saliva and soft penis skin against Castiel’s unshaven chin.

“You mean it?” breathed Dean, awe in his voice, desire darkening his eyes.

“Hell yeah! I can’t *believe* it took you two fricken *months* to figure out that you were going gaga over each other,” said Jimmy, nudging Castiel’s lips with his cock again. Holding Dean’s eyes, Castiel deliberately sucked the head of Jimmy’s cock back into his mouth. Jimmy gave an undignified squeak and continued, “I used to get wood just *watching* how you each stared at the other when ya thought no one would notice.”
“I don’t…get wood…” Dean mumbled.

“I deserved that, didn’t I…” muttered Jimmy. “Look, you want Cas, and Cas wants you, right?”

Dean took a deep breath, gave a half-shrug, and said, “Right.” He really does. Wow. And of course I… Castiel nodded his agreement, bobbing his head over Jimmy’s dick. Jimmy’s fingers tangled in his hair, encouraging him down, and Dean caught his lip between his teeth.

*How does Dean’s cock work? How will sex work? I want to explore everything, know everything, touch everywhere.*

“Well, I want Cas, obviously, and Cas wants me, equally obviously,” Jimmy continued, strain tinging his voice. “So the only—” Castiel sucked hard on the head of Jimmy’s cock and Jimmy broke off with a groan. “—the only hard part…no, tough part…no…fuck…we still need to work out you and I, right? Right. So we focus on what we agree on.”

*I can’t wait to make Dean feel as good as I’m able to make Jimmy feel. I hope that Dean is able to experience that. I hope…*

“That work for you, Dean?” Jimmy’s words were starting to dissociate from their meanings. It was hard to think with Dean’s eyes boring through him, Jimmy’s cock hot against his tongue, Jimmy’s hand holding Castiel’s head in place.

“Yeah…yeah, Jimmy…I’m pickin’ up what you’re puttin’ down…”

Neither Jimmy nor Dean moved.

Irritated for no reason he could put his finger on – I’m missing something here and I have no idea – Castiel spat out Jimmy’s cock.

“So what’s the plan?” he demanded, voice raspy, throat dry.

The bed shook, the mattress bounced, and Castiel went from hovering on his hands and knees over Jimmy’s crotch to lying on his back with no clue what had happened. Hands were on him – on his legs, his thighs, his shoulders – too many hands, holding him down, caressing him. His vision resolved blurry, shades of tan and brown that could have been anyone, except for blazing green that suddenly obliterated everything else. The rough fingers digging into Castiel’s shoulders were Dean’s, the inverted face above his Dean’s. It was too soon for him to get hard again, but he ached for Dean’s touch, ached to learn how sweet Dean’s mouth would taste, ached to learn how Dean’s rough skin would feel against every sensitive place on his body, in his body.

“Hello, Dean,” breathed Castiel.

“Hey, Cas,” Dean replied, lifting one hand for an awkward half wave. “This okay?”

“Depends what you have in mind,” Castiel answered honestly. Dean broke into a slow smile. “But provided you intend to touch me in gentle ways intended to give me pleasure, and are sensitive to the fact that I am…reticent…about anal play, I think we can—”

“For the love of Pete would you two morons just kiss already?” Jimmy interrupted.

“Sorry, Cas – you heard the man; orders are orders,” Dean said with a helpless shrug.

“Very w—”
Dean’s lips were rough and wind chapped.

Dean’s saliva —*where did that come from?* — tasted as sweet as the clover blooms Castiel had sampled a lifetime ago.

Dean’s breath filled Castiel’s mouth, his nose, his lungs, like a warm summer breeze.

Their kiss was brief, chaste, a starkly innocent contrast to the naughty way Jimmy’s nose nuzzled at Castiel’s testicles, Jimmy’s finger rubbed rough over his lubricated hole. Dean rose enough that their eyes could meet once more, fingers rubbing gentle circles into Castiel’s flesh.

“Good, Cas?”

“Very g—” Castiel gasped, eyes popping open wide, as Jimmy thrust into him hard with a finger. Dean chuckled — a sound that, in different circumstances, Castiel distractedly thought might be orgasm inducing without any additional stimulation — brought their faces together, and brushed wood-rough skin against Castiel’s cheek until his lips were against Castiel’s good.

“Awesome,” Dean breathed. “Cause your brother and I are going to*take you apart.*”

“As long as you—” Jimmy found Castiel’s prostate and scraped a nail over it; pain and pleasure mingled and Castiel could*feel* the blood rushing to swell his cock anew. “—long as you put me back together again!”

“Always, Cas,” promised Dean, kissing up the side of his face and bringing their lips back together. The kiss was gentle, tender, the faintest brush of Dean’s thick, awkward tongue against Castiel’s lips, a sharp contrast to how roughly Dean’s fingers closed over Castiel’s nipples and twisted. Castiel groaned into Dean’s mouth. “Man, I can’t*wait* to learn how to tease every single little noise out of your gorgeous lungs. Lungs, man – fuckin’ amazing.”

Castiel didn’t think that Jimmy and Dean managed to discover every noise he could make, but they certainly found some that Jimmy alone had been unable to prompt Castiel to produce. By the time they were done, Castiel was exhausted, filthy with come and sweat and spit, and had never felt better. All he could do was smile bemusedly as Jimmy rubbed his feet, as Dean sponged come and lube away with a wet washcloth. Both men changed into their pajamas and, for the first time since Dean woke up, the three of them shared a bed again, Castiel in the middle, Dean curled around his back, Jimmy chest-to-chest with him.

“This is perfect,” Castiel murmured contentedly.

“What do you say next time, we see how many times we can get*Jimmy* to come?” Dean whispered in his ear.

“You know I’m game,” said Jimmy.

“But Dean, did you come?” Castiel asked, reflecting on the day and realizing he couldn’t think of a single time that pleasure had made Dean’s features slack. Dean hadn’t even stripped, instead focusing on Castiel.

“Don’t worry,” Dean murmured reassuringly, shimmying closer to Castiel’s back and wrapping an arm around his waist. “That was*fantastic* to me.”

The next morning the patches of ground exposed where the snow had melted teemed with tall stalks with golden-green heads, same as had grown so profusely the previous fall, fully mature and abloom, motes of pollen scattered like specks of gold dust over the snow.
It was April 4th.

“In Greece, those are called ambrosia flowers, and lovers exchange them to tell each other that their feelings are reciprocated,” Jimmy explained, reading from an entry on his phone.

Dean looked sheepish. “‘Ambrosia flowers,’” he snorted. “It’s fricken ragweed, dude.”

But he didn’t contradict Jimmy’s interpretation of the flower’s symbolism, or the implication behind their blooming.

By the end of the day Castiel had smiled so hard, for so long, that his jaw ached.

All things considered...a great problem to have.

I could get used to this.

I can’t wait to get used to this.

“Really?” exclaimed Garth, breaking into an ingenuous grin of child-like wonder out of proportion to anything Castiel would have expected his observation to excite.

“Really,” Castiel confirmed, unable to keep from entering into Garth’s glee with a smile of his own. “We talked it over and decided to leave the fallen trunk where it is.”

Dean wanted to use the wood of his damaged tree to sculpt, and though it was only mid-spring, animals and birds and insects and plants and molds and fungi had already taken up residence on the bark and in the trunk and amidst the branches. Castiel had never imagined that a single felled tree could become a vibrant ecosystem, but Jimmy had explained it to him with an air of condescension by comparing it to whale falls in the ocean. Castiel hadn’t know what that was either, but now he did, and they had an idea for their next book, and Castiel had spent a lot of time looking at pictures of whale bones and isopods.

“You guys are awesome,” Garth said with a pleased sigh. He grounded his shovel, took a deep breath, and wiped sweat from his brow. “I love the plan you’ve got for your backyard. And you’re serious that I can bring students to come see?”

“No, we were just fuckin’ with you,” said Jimmy. Stepping up behind Garth, he gave the gangly man a slap on the back, and Garth laughed uproariously. “Of course we’re serious. What’s the point in mowing a fricken acre-plus of field every week? It takes hours, costs like $10 in lawnmower gas every time, and destroys the environment. We got compost dirt, we got heirloom saplings and sprouts, we got rocks, and we are ready to naturalize!” Jimmy struck a pose like a superhero, shooting Garth a thumbs up; Garth matched the gesture with a cocked grin. “Thanks for comin’ out to help today, by the way. I can’t think of a better way to use the money we’re saving on gas than this.”

As soon as the snow had melted, Castiel had gone out with his sketch pad and meticulously recreated their backyard in birds-eye view. Based on his drawing, they’d decided on a simple plan – most of the yard would be allowed to grow wild. Whatever took root, took root, though invasives and non-native plants would be removed, except in specific instances where the species didn’t edge out native plants, like the crocuses. The only concession to the use a person might wish to put the land to was a single path, following a meandering, worn course that Castiel hadn’t noticed when the lawn was being mowed regularly but which was obvious when the surrounding grasses were given free rein to grow as they would. That, they were formalizing that wending way as a path,
covering it with gravel so that it would be easy to maintain. Compared with the time they’d
invested in keeping the grass shorn, beautifying the trail would be easy, the time needed negligible.
The only hard part was the actual construction.

“You boys gonna stand ‘round all day and leave the heavy lifting to us ladies?” Jody called from
across the pond. Though she worked alongside Sheriff Hanscum – Donna – and Dean, there wasn’t
a trace of irony in her tone and Dean didn’t even flinch a contradiction to her characterization of his
gender.

“Actually, I’m just here to let ya’ll know that soup’s on,” Jimmy shouted back.

“Soup?” protested Donna. She shot a scandalized look at Jody. “I was promised cheeseburgers!”

Grumbling, not loud enough for Castiel to make out, drifted from Donna and Jody and Dean as
they trotted back to the house and the work that Garth and Castiel had done.

Digging out a large square suitable for building a stone patio had taken all morning. Castiel knew
nothing about construction, but Garth was an expert. He’d confidently told Jimmy and Castiel what
to buy and now he guided them through what to do. A narrow strip of soil between the patio and
the house was already planted with a tangle of brambles that had grown spontaneously several days
before. They’d be building two raised vegetable beds parallel to the patio, perpendicular to the
house. The part Castiel was most excited about, though, was the formal decorative garden planned
for the stretch of ground between the patio and down the slopes of the hill to the pond. The
brothers intended to plant shrubs and flowers that would attract bees and butterflies and provide
blooms spring, summer and fall, with a path down to the water and a bench for Dean to sit on when
he fished. The unfinished wood for a trellis took up most of their garage; Dean did the meticulous
work by hand, and when it was done, the trellis would be mounted to make a graceful arch over
Sam’s memorial. The honeysuckle, already starting to spread vines over the ground and stump,
would be trained along the trellis to fill the air with its sweet smell all season long.

_Honeysuckle only blooms in the spring_! had been a confused Garth’s response to this intention.

Castiel’s only answer was a secretive smile. The honeysuckle bloomed as long as Dean wanted it to
bloom. Watching Dean, grinning, healthy, tanned, freckles starting to dot his nose, sweat
inexplicably streaking his brow, Castiel couldn’t believe that anything Dean did still surprised him.

*But I’m glad it does. I hope he never stops surprising me, awing me, filling me with wonder and
love.*

“Ya know, I was worried that tree was a goner,” observed Garth minutes later as he took a huge
bite of his cheeseburger.

“Mighta been, without your help,” Dean replied, making a show of handling the grilling so he
could put off lying to explain why he wasn’t eating with them.

Placing the top bun over the ketchup he’d amply squeezed out, Castiel turned toward the tree. The
willow had recovered well from the ordeal of the winter. The shorn-off section of trunk had grown
tough from exposure, and each morning tiny twigs appeared as from thin air, suggesting the thick,
strong branches that would, with time, grow and replace what had been destroyed. The less
damaged section of the tree was vibrant with spring green, every dangling branch festooned with
leaves and tipped with the red of new growth.

“ ‘bout that.” Garth spoke around a full mouth. “Been thinkin’ – that’s north, right?” He pointed
toward the Merchant house. “More or less? And that’s south.” He pointed toward the side of their
house where the kitchen was. “That storm, the prevailing winds were north-to-south – ‘at’s how it was at my house. Figure it was same here – snow was stacked ten feet high on the lee o’ your place when I visited, right?”

“Right…” said Castiel.

“So why’d the tree fall into the pond?”

“Huh?”

“He’s right,” Jimmy said wonderingly. “With the way the wind was blowing, the tree shoulda fallen toward the house.”

“Not necessarily.” There was something cagey to Dean’s voice, and when Castiel looked toward him, Dean avoided eye contact. “Trees can fall any which way in a storm.”

“True, true,” Garth agreed, taking another big bite. “But…” He paused to chew and swallow. “‘s lucky for you, fell like it did.” Castiel’s gaze slid to Dean, who was extremely intent on flipping the burgers on the grill. “Other way, roots woulda torn up the pond, and a tree that big? Probably woulda hit the house. You boys were hangin’ out in the kitchen, right? Can’t imagine that flimsy excuse for a porch woulda stopped the branches from going right through the wall.”

“That was…lucky,” said Jimmy. Glancing at his brother, their eyes met, and both looked to Dean, who managed to convey frustration and exasperation in the way he put slices of cheese atop the mostly-cooked hamburgers. “Don’t you think so, Dean?”

“Donna, got another burger for you, if you’re ready,” Dean announced.

“Am I?” Donna laughed, walking to the grill and holding out her plate. “You gonna eat, Dean?”

“Eh, I’ve got this…thing…where if I do a bunch of work then eat right away I get sick to my stomach.” Shaking his head as if morose, Dean shared the lie they’d agreed on to explain to Garth, Jody, and Donna why he’d skip lunch. Donna looked horrified at the prospect, her gaze sympathetic as she took a bite of the burger that Dean placed before her. “I’ll have leftovers.”

Dean didn’t eat.

Being outside in the sunshine gave him the sustenance he required, inhaling carbon dioxide, exhaling oxygen, photosynthesizing. Dean couldn’t explain how his biology worked; he was a golem, a statue made animate, yet he was also alive, his existence linked to that of the tree. When it was dormant for the winter, he hibernated. When the flow of its sap renewed in the spring, Dean awoke. When the weather was fine, when the valley was healthy, Dean – tree and golem – thrived, and when nature ailed, he sickened. There were contradictions galore in the scattered tidbits Dean told them about how his existence worked. Castiel and Jimmy had given up trying to reconcile the information into a coherent picture.

Dean was magic. That was answer enough.

Judging by the flush browning Dean’s cheeks, the tense flex of his hands on the grill tongs, the furtive way he looked in every direction save toward Castiel and Jimmy, Dean had also saved their lives during the storm.

Why didn’t he say anything at the time?

Is that why he was out in the storm instead of…wherever he goes…when he’s not active?
How did I know he was in danger that night? Why did I feel compelled to run out in the storm, certain that he needed me?

“Dean—”

“So, Donna, I’ve been wondering, do you think I’m going to be expected to testify?” Jimmy interrupted. Castiel opened his mouth to protest but the grateful look on Dean’s face prompted Castiel to shut his mouth again. There was no need to expose Dean in front of everyone, no need to push him to speak of things that made him uncomfortable. Jimmy was right to change the subject. Willing down the desire to ask anyway, Castiel focused on his lunch.

Even if Dean never tells me, Garth is right. The tree should have hit the house, should have destroyed the pond, should have torn Sam’s shrine apart. Considering it now…it fell in the one direction that ensured it did the least harm. Virtually nothing was damaged except the tree. I can’t believe that’s a coincidence – can’t believe that’s a miracle. God doesn’t deserve that much credit, and the more I come to know Dean, the more I understand that he deserves so much more credit and respect and love than we give him, so much more than he’d ever ask for or expect.

Dean deserves everything we both can give him, and more.

“That’s a relief,” Jimmy said. “Don’t you think, Cas?”

“Sorry, I was distracted – what did you say?” Castiel shot an apologetic smile toward Donna.

“No worries,” she replied with a grin. Ketchup reddened her lips. “I get it – I’ve lost myself in a good burger a time or two. And these are damn good burgers. My compliments to the chef!”

Jimmy had taught Dean to cook. Considering that Dean didn’t eat, it was an odd hobby for him to take up, but Dean seemed to enjoy it. He’d learned of Castiel’s native vegetable garden plans, and Castiel had caught Dean more than once staring at the seedlings in their plastic-sided pseudo-greenhouse and flipping idly through a collection of recipes he’d transcribed onto flashcards.

Castiel’s seedlings were impressively verdant.

Castiel waited patiently as Dean grunted a response to Donna’s thanks, shoulders tense as he cleaned the grill. Donna chewed and swallowed.

“Anyway, like I explained to Jimbo,” she slapped Jimmy on the shoulder, “he busted the case wide open when he got his hands on that shotgun. The Feds took the whole shebang over, so I don’t hear much, but the Bender boys were arrested a couple weeks back and CPS gathered up Missy. Now the only argument is which state gets a crack at ‘um too. In comparison, the assault charge is small potatoes. And I’d add – based on what I have seen, the only reason I’m sayin’ ‘accused’ is ‘cause of the whole ‘innocent until proven guilty by a jury of their peers’ thing ‘cause they are guilty as sin. From what we can tell, even Missy got in on their sport a time or two. I saw a transcript where Pa all but admitted it. I’m thinkin’, with a little time, I can finally see through Bobby’s dream of razing that shack they call a cabin to the ground. Oh!” Donna put her burger down, eyes wide. “Oh, oh, oh! Now I remember where I heard the name Dean before! You’re that kid Bobby was always going on about! You’re younger than I expected!”

“Fuck,” muttered Dean.

“That reminds me,” Castiel cut in. Everyone turned to him, Donna blinking in surprise. “Dean, can
you take a look at that box in the basement I mentioned to you? The one I needed carried upstairs? I know this isn’t the best moment but—"

“No, no, I gotcha, Cas! Sorry, I said I’d do that yesterday, didn’t I?” Dean nodded, talking rapidly. “I’ll go do that. Now.” And he fled toward the house.

“He okay?” asked Donna sympathetically, staring after him.

“Bobby and Dean were close,” Jody said. “Practically father and son. It’s been rough for Dean since Bobby passed, ‘specially since he lost his brother the next year.”

“Well didn’t I stick my foot in it,” Donna said ruefully, taking another bite of burger and shaking her head.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be fine,” Jody reassured her. “Give ‘im a couple minutes. In the meantime – Jimmy, get me another of those burgers!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What did you call me?”

“Yes, Jody.”

“That’s more like it.”

“Aw man, we should do this regularly!” Garth said enthusiastically.

Once, the idea of having regular company would have made Castiel uncomfortable. Once, he would have been terrified what strangers would think about he and Jimmy living alone, what they’d make of the small signs of intimacy that neither brother was able to resist, the tender looks and soft touches they exchanged from time to time. Once, Castiel had argued against Jimmy’s plan of hosting a shindig on Labor Day, had preferred living quietly in solitude.

Now, he smiled broadly and said, “Of course! Once the patio is finished, why don’t we make it weekly?”

Even if they see the way our hands brush, the way our eyes meet, the way we smile at each other… yes, I’m embarrassed, but they are good people, and they’ve no reason to hurt us, no reason to out us. Even if they realize that Dean is always with us. Even if they realize what that implies about the three of us.

I’m not broken. I’m not twisted. I love two wonderful men, and they love me, and we’re happy. There’s nothing wrong with that.

And they’re not strangers. They’re our friends.

“That is the best idea you’ve ever had.” Jimmy beamed at him, and Castiel beamed back.


Moving here. Meeting Dean. Sharing my feelings with them both. Loving them both. Everything since our parents died has been a string of good decisions that have combined to bring us to this point. Even the ostensibly bad decisions – like visiting the Benders – have proved to have positive outcomes. They’re incarcerated and no more innocent people will suffer.

Dean is safe.
“Man, this is gonna be an awesome summer,” Garth gushed.

“Yeah.” Castiel turned a broad toward each of his friends in turn, and reveled in their obvious, reciprocated happiness. “Yeah, this summer is going to be fantastic. Thanks for helping us out with everything, Garth. Thank you all, for everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Plants mentioned for the first time this chapter:

Ambrosia Flower (aka common ragweed, buffalo weed): reciprocated love.

Anemone (aka hepatica, liverleaf, liverwort, thimbleweed): anticipation, feeling forsaken, sickness, eternal love. In the early church, anemone was a symbol of the trinity and was often used to symbolize sorrow and death, especially in Crucifixion scenes.

Crocus: childlike delight, preciousness, cheerfulness, new beginnings, foresight

Trillium: rebirth, symmetry, purity.
"You saved our lives."

Dean was middle spoon that night. It had been two weeks since they’d started rehabilitating the backyard, letting most of it go wild, and they’d worked on it at least a few hours every day. Sometimes, Donna, Garth, or Jody came by and helped. Jody’s visits alone were always the most pleasant, the least awkward, because Jody knew the truth about Dean. Garth’s visits were also fun; it was impossible to tell if he suspected the truth about Dean’s nature – sometimes he said things that led Castiel to suspect he did, but other times he seemed so adorably oblivious that Castiel wasn’t sure – but regardless, he was so enthusiastic, so energetic, so knowledgeable, that his presence was always brightening, if fatiguing.

"Wasn’t nothin’,” Dean muttered. The ghost of green light vanished from Castiel’s eyelids; he blinked and saw Dean’s eyes shut as he turned his face into the pillow, abashed.

"Oh, so now we’re nothing, are we?” Jimmy mocked. “Didn’t realize we meant that little to you! Is that why you never come?”

"Aw, Jimmy...dude...do we have to…?” Dean’s voice was muffled by the pillow fabric.

The urge to distract Jimmy and defend Dean conflicted with Castiel’s curiosity and concern. Dean always seemed to enjoy sex. After they were intimate, the next time Castiel looked outside he was invariable greeted by a fantastic, fantastical profusion of blossoms. Dean was no longer ashamed of the floral outbursts he produced.

Mountain laurel, for immortality, glory, and victory.

Blackberry, for loss and remembrance.

Buttercups, for humility.

Liverleaf, for sadness.

Asters, for love and trust.

Redbud, for betrayal and remorse.

“We never have to talk about anything you don’t want to talk about, Dean,” Castiel promised.

The more Castiel learned about the symbolism related to the plants and shrubs and trees in their yard, the better Castiel became at reading Dean’s moods. Sometimes, he’d seem reticent or withdrawn or angry, and Castiel wouldn’t be able to figure out why until he saw what new flowers had bloomed, looked up the related symbolism, and reconstructed what Dean must be thinking. The redbud had been the most shocking discovery. The morning after Dean had thrust into Jimmy’s body for the first time, the first time Jimmy had come moaning over Dean’s belly while Castiel watched and touched himself, awed by their passion, there was a new tree grown so close to the path they’d built that the burrowing roots had jostled the stones, and every branch had been festooned and encircled with tiny red flowers.
“According to the bible, Judas hung himself from a redbud tree,” Jimmy explained when Dean, antsy, had declared he was going for a walk and strode out of the house, steps rattling beneath him.

“He’s thinking about Sam,” Castiel realized sadly.

The flowers had faded with time but the tree was still there. They’d moved the path to make sure the roots had enough room to spread. Sometimes, the plants whose growth Dean inspired remained and passed through the semblance of a normal life cycle; other times, they disappeared without a trace, wilted by the end of the day, or were replaced by a completely new field of flowers by morning.

_I wish I could reassure him, wish I could make it clear to him that his affection for us doesn’t negate the love he felt for Sam. I didn’t know Sam, but from what the Carters and the Merchants and Jody say, his paramount concern would have been seeing Dean happy._

Memories and concern foremost in his mind, Castiel leaned forward and kissed Dean. They were chest to chest, enough space between them for each to lie comfortably. Castiel could feel Dean’s warmth, could wrap an arm around Dean’s chest and reach Jimmy. Jimmy curled against Dean’s back and hugged Dean close, a hand over where Dean’s heart would be, if he had one.

_He may not have the physical organ but Dean has a heart. He has one of the greatest hearts of anyone I’ve met – giving, kind, generous, loving…_

“I love you,” Castiel breathed. Dean’s throat bobbed as he quashed a needy sound. Skimming a hand up Castiel’s back, Dean pulled him close and kissed him again, again, again. “Does kissing me feel good for you, Dean?”

“Yeah…” Dean said, flicking his tongue against Castiel’s lips.

“Can you taste me? How does it feel to—”

With a shrug that knocked Jimmy back, Dean rolled toward Castiel, rolled over him, straddled Castiel with his legs, placed an arm on either side of Castiel’s face, and deepened their kiss.

“Hard to describe,” Dean replied, returning to lick into Castiel’s mouth, brush against Castiel’s palate, tease at Castiel’s cheeks. Eyes slipping shut, Castiel raised his arms and ran them over Dean’s sides, his back, savoring the kiss, adoring the feel of pleasure flaring hot through his veins, making his blood pump and his cock thicken. “No taste…just a _feeling_…”

“You’ve said stuff like that before,” observed Jimmy. Compared to how hot and happy Castiel felt, Jimmy sounded confusingly cognizant and in control of himself. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot.”

Dean pulled off Castiel’s mouth with a groan, though Castiel didn’t know what Jimmy had done to him.

“How did Cassie know you needed help, that night in January?”

The question seemed such a non-sequitur that Castiel opened his eyes, shimmied up the bed, lifted himself to his elbows and watched as Jimmy knelt behind Dean, reached between his legs and stroked Dean’s wooden cock. As far as Castiel had been able to determine, Dean had a penis _only_ for the purpose of sexual pleasure. He neither drank nor ate, so had no need to urinate or defecate. He had no anus. As he had never come, Castiel assumed he had no semen. Presumably, if Dean wished to procreate, it would be as his mother had done – by means of carving a golem by hand made from the wood of a sapling spawned from his catkins.
I wonder if Dean would want children?

I’d never thought about having a family of my own, always assumed my proclivities and desires precluded me from having one. But we could…the three of us could, maybe, raise another generation of willows on the banks of the pond…

Dean’s eyes flew open, glimmering green washed Castiel’s vision as if he were viewing the world through a screen of sun-saturated leaves, and Dean moaned.

“It’s quite the mystery, isn’t it?” mused Jimmy, expression detached as he rubbed a thumb over the head of Dean’s cock, used his other fingers to massage Dean’s testicles. “Like, just now – that was one hell of a reaction given that all I’m doing is touching your dick, Dean. Cas, what are you thinking about?”

A jolt of shame stabbed cold down Castiel’s throat. “Oh, um, it was nothing, it was…”

“S’ok, Cas…s’ok…tell him…”

Wait, what?

That almost sounds like…

Shame made the words come slowly, but Castiel made himself say, “I was thinking about children.” Dean nodded encouragingly, mouth open slack as he rocked against Jimmy’s hand. God, he’s beautiful like that. Dean moaned. “About…about how we’re all men, so normally we couldn’t…but trees can be pollinated at a distance, and once there was a sapling, Dean could carve a body, and…it sounds ridiculous when I say it aloud…”

“It doesn’t.” Jimmy’s voice was light, nonjudgmental, casual, even as hitched sounds started to escape Dean’s self-control. Castiel had rarely seen Dean so engrossed by sex. “Now, think something unsexy.”

“No…” Dean groaned.

“Dean?”

“No…don’t…fuck, I feel…don’t stop, don’t stop, don’t…”

What?

Confused, Castiel looked from Dean’s slack face to Jimmy’s, a victorious smile spreading over his lips.

“He doesn’t mean me, Cas,” Jimmy said. “He means you.”

“But that’s…”

Impossible? Magical? I’m thinking about raising golem tree babies with the two men I love. Dean being capable of telepathy would be the least weird thing about this.

“Cas…fuck, Cas, he’s…Jimmy’s right…ish…just…didn’t know what you were thinkin’…but it made…it made you so fuckin’ happy…just considerin’ it…feels incredible when you’re happy, always has, fuck, that’s part of what…part of what attracted me to you in the first place…you feel so openly…”

“Look at me, Dean,” Castiel commanded, reaching up and cupping his hands around Dean’s
cheeks. Every breath from Dean was a pant that expelled humid, sweet-smelling air before Castiel’s nose. Dean’s eyes were out of focus, green a glowing halo around the dark circles of his pupils.

“Cas…”

“It’s okay…I’ve got you, Dean…”

“We’ve got you…” Jimmy echoed. The clinical, disconnected look faded from his eyes; he smiled and winked at Castiel.

“I love you, Dean,” Castiel said, summoning every feeling the words evoked, focusing on them, letting them burgeon and blossom and grow like a tree taking root, like a flower opening to the sun. Love suffused him like heat, care, tenderness, pooled tears in his eyes, fixed his lips in a toothy grin. Dean’s jaw went slack around a moan. Jimmy’s hand made a dry sound where he rubbed Dean’s erection.

“Fuck, aw…fuck, fuck, fuck, fu—”

Hands working continually, Jimmy shifted forward, aligned himself over Dean. The position was awkward; Jimmy was shorter than Dean, his face only coming up to Dean’s shoulder. Dean moaned again, his eyes slipping shut, and there was a smack of wood on skin as he thrust his hips back and forth against Jimmy’s hand, his ass hitting Jimmy’s crotch with each thrust.

“I love you, Dean,” Jimmy grumbled.

“Jimmy…” Castiel breathed, turning his radiant smile on his brother.

“Oh my fuck…oh…"

“I do, Dean…do you feel it?” Jimmy asked.

Dean nodded frantically, mouth snapping shut, teeth digging into his lip. Sweat streaked his forehead, his hair a disheveled curtain sweeping over his forehead and closed eyes. Watching Jimmy, Castiel almost thought he could feel Jimmy’s love for Dean as well. He certainly felt something, though he couldn’t have said what. A certainty settled over his thoughts, evocative of how positive he’d been months before that Dean was in danger, but this time Castiel knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was cherished and adored.

Bucking back against Jimmy, Dean’s throat corded around a silent shout. Tears – no, they’re brown, that’s resin – squeezed from Dean’s eyes, he managed a sobbing gasp, and then he went still, sweat dripping onto Castiel’s chest. Castiel felt incredible, molten and tingly and overjoyed. Something hot soaked into his shirt, pooled on his stomach, and…

Amazed, Castiel flopped back on to the bed and reached between his and Dean’s body to trace his fingers through the liquid. Dean yet pumped weakly against Jimmy’s hand, adoration yet pummeled Castiel’s mind so gloriously that he could scarce think, and he lifted his hand to reveal sticky…something…coating his skin.

I wonder what Dean’s come tastes like?

Curious, Castiel lifted his finger to his mouth. Dean’s eyes flickered open, dazzling green coming into focus on Castiel’s face, and Dean’s mouth formed a silent oooooo of wonder as he watched Castiel sample the flavor. It was thick, musky, and strangely sweet. The droplet he’d sampled coated Castiel’s mouth, mixed with his saliva, and the texture was smooth and pleasant. Another
spurt widened the dark stain on his undershirt.

“Still hard, right?” asked Jimmy as if his hand wasn’t still wrapped around Dean’s erection.

“Yeah, I…” Dean swallowed.

*Why does he swallow? How does he come? Where does his sweat come from? If it’s all illusion, shouldn’t it fade when it’s no longer part of his body? Yet there are still wet spots on my shirt, still the taste of syrup in my mouth. In a lifetime, in a lifetime of lifetimes, I could never understand what a marvel Dean Winchester is.*

“I love you,” whispered Castiel.

“Fuck, Cas…” Shaking off Jimmy, who tumbled aside with a mock-irritated squawk, Dean rolled onto his back. “You know I…I mean…you’re…” Dean shook his head. For whatever reason, the word ‘love’ never left Dean’s lips, and sometimes he seemed embarrassed that he couldn’t vocalize his feelings. Reflecting on the profound **solidity** of the intangible emotion that Dean and Jimmy had projected, Castiel could only smile. Even should Dean never say the words, Castiel wouldn’t mind. He knew. “I got something for you,” Dean finished lamely.

Surprised, Castiel shifted onto his side and got an arm beneath his head so he could look a question at Dean. Dean gave him a wan smile, cheeks still flushed. Jimmy righted himself, sitting cross legged and the edge of the bed, watching them.

“Yeah…um…so I was thinking,” Dean continued in a rush. “You were saying… ‘member when we had that group chat ‘bout anal, and you were still kinda freaked but it was pretty clear that size was the issue?” Castiel nodded.

Jimmy had asked what the difference was between a finger in Castiel and a cock in Castiel, that one struck him as fine but the other made him uncomfortable. It was a reasonable question, and Castiel has spent some time thinking about it and talked it over with Dr. Moseley. There was something that struck him as **dirtier** about having a penis in him that didn’t apply to fingers. Castiel expelled waste from his anus, and Jimmy expelled waste from his cock, and the combination struck Castiel as much more disgusting than the combination of anus and finger. Hands could be easily washed and soaped and scrubbed until every trace of filth was gone. Jimmy had followed up Castiel’s answer by asking about Dean’s cock – after all, Dean’s cock didn’t expel waste. As far as Castiel knew, until today Dean’s cock had never expelled anything. Again, Castiel had taken a step back, examined the problem (very closely, with his mouth and his tongue and his fingers and his thighs) and concluded that filth wasn’t an issue but Dean was intimidatingly large. The idea that Castiel might take something of such length and girth into himself was terrifying. If the cock belonged to Dean, who could be easily washed and polished, and if size wasn’t an issue, Castiel thought he could try. The idea intimidated him, but it didn’t set his heart to racing with panic as the idea of, say, Jimmy’s cock did.

That had been weeks ago.

They hadn’t talked about it since.

But Castiel had thought about it.

Castiel had thought about it a lot, and been a smidge disappointed that apparently his partners hadn’t.

He was relieved to discover he’d been unfair in his assessment of Dean.
“So, um, I made you a gift,” said Dean. Carefully, Dean slid off the bed; he was always careful since he’d flopped over too heavily once and snapped one of the slats supporting the mattress. “I’ll go get it, okay? Back in a few.”

As soon as Dean was out the bedroom door, Jimmy grabbed Castiel’s hand and tugged toward the bathroom. “I got you something too.”

“What’s going on?” asked Castiel suspiciously.

“Something I think you’re going to like – I’m asking you to trust me on this, okay?” Jimmy waited until Castiel nodded and followed where Jimmy led, allowing himself to be drawn out of the room. From the corner of his eye he saw Dean’s head bobbing as he went down the stairs. Jimmy pulled Castiel across the hall to the bathroom. Leaving Castiel to stand, awkward and confused, in the doorway, Jimmy opened the cabinet beneath and pulled out a blue bag, which he handed to Castiel with a triumphant, pleased expression on his face.

Baffled, Castiel took the bag and opened it. Within was a plastic bag, a length of tubing, a couple white plastic sticks, and a paper instruction booklet.

“What...?”

“And here I thought you were the brother that reads the instructions,” said Jimmy, rolling his eyes. Castiel rolled his own in return and pulled the booklet out.

*Easy Enema Kit*, it read in bold letters.

“You seem...kinda hung up...on the ways you perceive your ass as dirty,” Jimmy explained. “I thought you might like cleaning it up?”

Tears pricked Castiel’s eyes. He knew little enough about enemas, and the idea of using the kit set his pulse fluttering with nerves, but the sentiment represented by Jimmy getting it for him was amazing, and the acceptance that the kit represented was wonderful.

“Um...I don’t...” Castiel shook his head and opened the cover of the book. *Congratulations on your purchase of the Easy Enema Kit, for all your at-home enema needs!* Jimmy quailed as Castiel left his sentence hanging. Desperate to reassure Jimmy that Castiel didn’t mean his hesitancy as a condemnation of Jimmy’s gift, Castiel finished in a rush, “I don’t know how to administer an enema.”

“Don’t worry, I do,” Jimmy said brightly. “And believe me, I would love to help.”

Castiel nearly came from the enema.

It wasn’t that having his rectum flushed felt good – it did, sort of, but it also didn’t, sort of. However, the feeling of being washed clean defied description. Even as the enema flushed out the waste in his body, Jimmy carefully scrubbed and shaved and massaged and rinsed the outside of Castiel’s perineum. When he was done, Jimmy gently used a finger to smear lubricant around Castiel’s rim and within his body, and he held out a hand to show Castiel how there wasn’t a smear of feces. Jimmy’s finger even *smelled* fresh, fruity and sugary from the flavored lubricant that Jimmy had bought. Holding himself back for whatever surprise Dean had in store for him was hard, and the effort left Castiel breathless, aching, and strangely, newly empty. His imagination ran wild wondering what Dean had gotten him. Based on the available evidence, Castiel thought a dildo most likely, a small one that wouldn’t make him uncomfortable. Jimmy had shown Castiel some online listings for rectal dilators meant to help people grow more comfortable taking
something large anally, and Castiel had hedged on whether he’d be willing to try. He wasn’t opposed per se, he simply wasn’t sure.

*Who’d manipulate the toy? Would I? Some dildos have suction cup bottoms, right? Or maybe Jimmy or Dean would wear it as a strap on? Or we could get a vibrator?*

Considering the options was overwhelming, and as Castiel rose from the bathtub, where he’d rested on hands and knees as Jimmy administered the enema, he was dizzy considering how much he wanted to know what came next. His legs trembled weakly, his head spun, his skin was hot and flushed. His butt felt weird, stretched and cold, the area between his cheeks slick, and his shorn skin was simultaneously itchy and silky smooth. His cock, red and glimmering with liquid around the tip, proceeded him obscenely. Castiel tottered and scarce caught himself with a hand on the sink.

“Woah, need a hand there, bro?” asked Jimmy with a leer.

“No...no, I’m alright, thank you,” Castiel replied with a half-smile.

“’kay, awesome. I’m just gonna stick my head down the hall and make sure Dean’s ready to go.”

Jimmy darted ahead as Castiel took one slow step at a time, keeping a hand on the wall to steady himself. When he reached the doorway, he froze. Jimmy stood, naked, beside the bed. Dean lay on his back, a pillow propping his head up so he could see the door. His erection – the same thick cock Castiel was familiar with – stood straight up, honey-toned and lovely and utterly intimidating. Castiel quailed, his knees nearly giving way.

“Woah, woah, relax, Cas...” Dean said, pushing himself up into a half-seated position. Staring mesmerized at the play of Dean’s abs muscles distracted Castiel from his worries. Watching how Dean’s body functioned was continually awe-inspiring, continually reminded Castiel that he had been blessed to meet Dean, blessed to be among the scant number of humans in the world who knew that magic was *real*, blessed to be trusted by one of the most remarkable people he’d ever met. “I just thought you’d like to see...so, uh, this is what I made you...”

Dean lifted one hand, clenched around something, and held it out toward Castiel. Lurching as he walked, Castiel crossed to the bed and managed to make it look like his accidentally falling against it was him taking an intentional seat. When he had his equilibrium back, he reached for what Dean held, but instead of passing it over, Dean twisted his hand palm-up and opened his fingers. Within was a small, elongated object that Castiel supposed must be a dildo, but despite its small size it didn’t instill him with confidence. It was short, curved, and thin, and unlike every toy Castiel had encountered, it didn’t have a flared base. Instantly, Castiel’s mind filled with horrified images of the dildo getting stuck within him, of Jimmy having to drive him to the hospital, of Castiel having to explain to a room of disgusted nurses and doctors that he’d gotten a sex toy lodged in his ass.

But Dean made it for me...

The toy was lovely, the same finished pale wood tone as Dean’s cock, polished so smooth that the green of Dean’s eyes reflected off the length. Forcing himself to philosophical acceptance, reached for the toy again. *I’ll take it and explain that I appreciate his efforts but I’m still not comfortable using even a pseudo-cock, not yet.* Dean tsked, wrapped his fingers back around it, and put it down beside him. As Castiel watched with growing astonishment, Dean reached between his legs, wrapped a hand around his cock, and with a sharp yank pulled his dick free from his body.

“De—”
Ignoring Castiel, Dean tossed his dick aside – *Dean tossed his dick aside!! What!? – grabbed the toy he’d made for Castiel and socketed it into place where his other dick – *other dick? I am never going to get used to this! – had been. The dildo fused seamlessly with Dean’s body; within seconds there was no telling where Dean’s pelvis ended and the new attachment began.

“So you’re like a Kitchen Aide?” Castiel asked, stunned.

“What?” spluttered Dean.

Laughing, Jimmy said, “No, no, I think Cassie’s hit the nail on the head. How about for your next trick, you make the pasta attachment?”

“Thrusting strikes me as an excellent means of knead dough,” Castiel managed to say with an air of detached observation. Dean let loose a string of incoherent protests, but the pace of his objections slowed, and Castiel tore his gaze from Dean’s new cock and realized Dean was staring at him.

“Do you like it?” asked Dean weakly. “Or are you two assholes going to keep teasing me ‘til kingdom come?”

“Oh, we are going to tease you, there’s no getting around that,” Jimmy said. “Robo-boyfriend isn’t getting off the hook that easily.”

“Now, now, Jimmy – he’s a tree, not a robot.”

“So you’re saying we shouldn’t be surprised that his wood is interchangeable?” said Jimmy, and he broke into a thoughtful grin, a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Ya know, I saw a picture of a tree where some mad scientist had grafted branches of a plum tree, a nectarine tree and a peach tree together into, like, the Frankenstein’s monster of trees and—”

“Sorry to interrupt, brother, but now that I understand how my present works, I’d really like to begin a hands-on exploration of Dean’s wood,” said Castiel blandly. Dean broke into a relieved, excited grin and lay back. “But I may need a hand.”

“Or a branch?” suggested Jimmy.

“You guys know I’m not actually a tree, right?” whined Dean. Ignoring him, Castiel opted for crawling over the bed and taking up a position straddling Dean. Nerves and anticipation made an unpleasant cocktail in his breast, but the hopeful look in Dean’s eye gave him strength. The bed shifted beneath them and then Jimmy sidled up, also straddling Dean’s legs, and lined his body up with Castiel’s, Jimmy’s erection pressing into the small of Dean’s back. Dean watched, wide-eyed, and Castiel took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and dropped his head on his brother’s shoulder.

“That’s right, Cassie...” Jimmy murmured encouragingly. “I’ve got you – we’ve got you. We’d never hurt you.”

“Never,” echoed Dean.

“All we want is for you to feel fricken amazing, so if anything happens that makes you uncomfortable, you let us know.”

“I will,” Castiel vowed.

“What do you want, Cas?” Dean’s gruff voice abraded like touch over Castiel’s skin, tickled and teased goosebumps taut along his arms.
“You, Dean,” breathed Castiel. “Both of you.” A twinge of his familiar reticence caused him to hesitate for a moment, required him to breathe through a flicker of panic. Effortlessly, he summoned the now-familiar litany.

I am not dirty.

I am allowed to want this.

I am allowed to enjoy physical pursuits with Dean and Jimmy.

They are allowed to enjoy physical pursuits with me.

There is nothing wrong with the love the three of us share.

“I want to feel your penis inside me, Dean,” Castiel whispered.

Jimmy’s hand slipped between Castiel’s butt cheeks, slid down the slickened skin and wrapped around Dean’s cock. Dean’s hands took hold of Castiel’s hips, gently urging him down, and with both wonderful, gorgeous, caring men treating Castiel tenderly, delicately, so much better than he deserved – *no, exactly how I deserve, I deserve this, we all deserve this* – Castiel settled back on his heels, his hole spreading negligibly, and he took Dean within him for the first time. The curved tip of the cock rubbed hard over Castiel’s skin and settled perfectly against his prostate as if it had been made for precisely that purpose, and Castiel groaned as pleasure lit up his thoughts, lit up his eyelids.

“Gonna make you feel so good, Cas,” said Dean. “Can’t wait...can’t...”

“You ready, brother?” Jimmy asked, a request for Castiel to express himself, a reprimand to remind Dean that he needed to be patient.

“Yes...yes, I’m ready,” Castiel said. He opened his eyes and met Dean’s gaze. “Fuck me, Dean.”

“Aw, hell,” Dean moaned, rolling his hips up.

From the first thrust, Castiel understood how profoundly different having a cock in him was from having a finger. It defied his descriptive powers – *Jimmy could describe it, poetically, and have me draw the accompanying illustrations as well* – but where a finger felt controlled, planned, intentional, having Dean filling him and filling him and filling him felt...wild, dirty, and utterly fantastic. Dean’s hands on his hips guided Castiel, encouraged him to rise and fall with every thrust. Jimmy kissed Castiel’s neck, mirroring their rise and fall, and Jimmy rubbed his cock against Castiel’s back, toyed with Castiel’s nipples until they hurt, mouthed incoherent words of praise against Castiel’s skin. With every bounce, Castiel’s cock slapped against Dean’s belly, stung with the impact, provided a stunning counterpoint to the intense stimulation of Dean’s dick rubbing against Castiel’s prostate.

*I love you, Dean.*

Dean groaned, his fingers tensing and relaxing against Castiel’s hips, and thrust harder.

*Do you feel it? Can you sense how much I adore you? Do you know how spectacular I feel taking you inside me?*

Letting his eyes roll shut, Castiel gave over thought, gave over shame, gave over rationality, in favor of pure emotion. Bliss roiled him. Ecstasy enveloped him. Rapture destroyed him and remade him over and over, until Castiel wasn’t sure where he was, wasn’t sure what he was, wasn’t sure
even who he was, but he knew, knew, that the hot weight beneath him, the hot weight behind him, the hot weight within him, was glory and forgiveness and jubilation, everything right and good in the world. If he could keep feeling this way forever, he’d never need anything else, and the only thing better than stretching out the perfection of this moment ad infinitum was the certainty that by his actions, by his movements, Castiel made the two men with him feel equally good.

Hard smoothness surrounded Castiel’s cock.

A groan tore from him. Thrusting hard against Dean within him, thrusting hard against whatever surrounded his dick, Castiel chased a high unlike anything he’d ever experienced. Jimmy murmured encouragement in his ear, rutting against him, and Castiel tried to put some of what he felt, any of what he felt, into words, but no words would come, only desperate moans.

Green erupted over Castiel’s consciousness, heat soaked him inside and out. With a cry, Castiel came, and the absolute certainty of divine bliss nearly caused him to black out. Only after long minutes of ragged breathing and desperate whimpers and needy jerks of his hips did Castiel realize that his cock was limp. Dean had come too; Dean’s orgasm had amplified his own, or vice versa, to drive Castiel so high he was practically in the stratosphere. Jimmy whispered a reassurances in Castiel’s ear that only gradually resolved into words, though Castiel could still scarce suss out the meaning.

“...fuckin’ hottest thing I’ve ever seen, Cas, you know that, right? The two of you – man, I’ve been waiting, waiting to try this with you, from the day I realized you and Dean had the hots for each other, from the day I met Dean, and now I finally, finally get to...and if you’re ready, brother, think you can get off him? Cause unless I’m missin’ something I think our Deanie boy has permanent wood and a non-existent refractory period and there is something I’ve gotta try and...”

Only Jimmy’s hands on Castiel’s hips, urging him up, urging him forward, clued Castiel in that Jimmy wanted him to move. Flopping over Dean, Castiel allowed himself to be steered and shifted, until his legs straddled Dean’s abs. His rear end felt depressingly exposed sticking up in the air; his lips hovered over Dean’s. Dean blinked, green glow highlighting his features, and gave Castiel a dazed smile.

“Heya, Castiel,” Dean mumbled. “Was that as fricken amazing for you as it was for me?”

“Don’t your abilities guarantee that’s the case?”

“Well, when ya put it that way, I—” Dean’s gasp and Jimmy’s satisfied sigh spoke to Jimmy taking Castiel’s place on Dean’s cock.

“Need this so fuckin’ bad, you’ve got no idea,” whispered Jimmy. Lifting himself, settling himself, Castiel recognized by feel and the rocking of the bed that Jimmy was finding a rhythm. Jimmy’s thighs rubbed against Castiel’s calves, and Jimmy’s hands curled around Castiel’s ass cheeks, massaging them, rubbing them, spreading them apart and pushing them back together. “I’ve had a plug in for a fricken hour. And now that we’ve gotten clean ol’ Cassie good and dirty, I also can’t wait to get a taste of Dean’s come.”

“What do you m—”

Jimmy’s lips closed around Castiel’s hole.

Pleasure exploded behind his eyeballs. Scarce aware what he was doing, Castiel kissed Dean frantically and rocked back against Jimmy’s mouth. The terrified part of his mind that whispered about sin and dirt tried to scream protest at what Jimmy was doing – his lips are on my ass that’s
beyond foul – but Castiel felt fantastic, swamped by everything that the three of them felt combined, and he was so done fighting what he wanted.

He wanted to feel ecstasy.

He wanted to help Jimmy and Dean feel ecstasy.

And there’s nothing gross about that sentiment, and there’s nothing gross about my butt right now!

“Cas...?” Jimmy asked hesitantly, pulling his lips away.

Castiel shoved himself back against Jimmy’s mouth, and Jimmy gasped.

“Dean, tell my brother to lick my anus.”

“Jimmy, lick Cas’ ass, and switch out for my bigger cock.”

“Yes, good, Jimmy – do that, do exactly what Dean says.”

“Fuck, you taste good Cas...”

Dean’s lips were on Castiel’s, Dean’s hands were on his hips, Jimmy’s tongue pressed into his hole, and Castiel almost thought he could come again immediately.

He couldn’t, of course.

It was alright, though. They had all the time in the world.

Best night of my life.

Dawn found them awake in bed, beyond exhausted, filthy with come and sweat, elated beyond description. Only Dean could still sustain an erection; Castiel had lost count of his orgasms after three, his cock aching from overstimulation, and when Jimmy had suggested that Castiel and he could get Dean off again Dean had wept sappy tears at the possibility and Jimmy had made fun of him for five minutes straight about what kind of sap actually cries sap oh my God this is classic!

They lay close, inhaling together, exhaling together, listlessly running fingers over the curves of each other’s bodies. As tired as Castiel was, going to sleep was unfathomable. The feelings bouncing between them were too new, too fantastic, and Castiel never wanted the night to end. Nature called, though, and as an incandescent beam of sunlight painted the far wall of the bedroom a shade of yellow that burned Castiel’s eyes, he forced himself up, stumbled to the bathroom, and relieved himself.

Tottering back to the bedroom, Castiel froze in the doorway. Jimmy and Dean lay tangled in the blankets, limbs entwined, both blinking bleary-eyed him. As gorgeous as they were, though, they were not what held Castiel spellbound.

Outside, sunlight shone off the dewy grasses, gleamed off the duckweed-clogged surface of the pond, flittered with every beat of butterfly wings around their bee balm. There was no verdant growth, no unexpected mass of flowers speaking to Dean’s elation throughout the night.

The willow tree was blooming.

At this distance, Castiel could scarce make out the flowers, but the tree was as yellow as the sunshine, as burnished as gold, and every breeze stirred motes of pollen that fell like rain. Rings of
spectacular yellow like topaz gemstones limned the water lilies that bloomed in the pond and swirled in the air like glitter.

“Come see,” he breathed.

Rising, concerned looks on their faces, Jimmy and Dean joined him, their worry fading to wonder as they saw what had happened.

“It’s never…” Dean whispered. “I’ve never…”

“Are those your first catkins, Dean?” asked Castiel. Dean nodded, tears in his eyes. Embarrassed, he tried to wipe the moisture away but only managed to smear dark sap lines down his cheeks.

“So, what’s involved in this sapling process?” Jimmy said with an air of false casualness.

“Would...is that something you want?” There was an unmistakable strain of hope in Dean’s voice.

“I think it definitely bears talking about,” said Castiel solemnly.

“Are you kidding? This magic shit is awesome, I want to learn everything!” said Jimmy with a grin.

“Okay…” Dean huffed a breath. “Okay. Uh...we can talk about that. Later. You two need some rest, and there’s a lot of planning to do if we’re going to...to...you know...oh wow...but first we should talk. When we’re not exhausted.”

With gentle nudges, Dean herded them back to the bed, and sharing secretive smiles, Jimmy and Castiel gathered Dean between them, tangled him in their arms and legs. As soon as he was lying down, fatigue washed Castiel under.

I love you, Castiel.

Dean’s voice was a faint whisper – Castiel couldn’t imagine Dean had even spoken aloud – but it haunted Castiel as he fell asleep.

I love you too, Dean. I love you, Jimmy.

I know you do, two different voices seemed to echo through his mind. I know.

Sleep well, my loves.

Chapter End Notes

And that's a wrap, guys! I hope you liked this story! As a reminder, Chapter 19 is an appendix/glossary of the flowers and plants talked about in this story.

Thanks for reading, everyone. :)

Plants mentioned for the first time in this chapter:

Beebalm (aka bergamot): money, prosperity, fertility.
Mountain laurel: immorality, glory, victory.

Redbud: betrayal and remorse. Judas is said to have hung himself from a redbud tree.

**Bonus art!**
Appendix

Chapter Notes

This is an appendix discussing the flowers and plants mentioned in this story. I am not a botanist, and scarce even a hobbyist, but I did my best to research these to focus on species native to the upstate New York region, or those that have grown locally long enough to have been effectively "nativized," such as dandelions and clover (these are technically invasives but they're everywhere...).

Entries are in alphabetical order; links are to sources with descriptions and/or images of the plants in questions. Note that not all the flowers were actually named in the story - if I get the time I'll include a note indicating which chapter the flower was mentioned or described in, but I may not get the time, sorry! Sources from which I compiled the symbolism are listed at the end. I've also given the religious symbolism and artistic symbolism associated with a plant, if applicable, because as the title suggests, there are some intentional religious overtones in these choices as well.

If I intended you to think of a specific sub-species, that sub-species is in **bold**.

**Ambrosia Flower** (aka common ragweed, buffalo weed): reciprocated love. Native varieties: *ambrosia trifida, ambrosia artemisiifolia*. (Chapter 2, Chapter 17)

**Anemone** (aka hepatica, liverleaf, liverwort, thimbleweed): anticipation, feeling forsaken, sickness, eternal love. In the early church, anemone was a symbol of the trinity and was often used to symbolize sorrow and death, especially in Crucifixion scenes. Native varieties: *anemone quinquefolia, anemone virginiana, anemone acutiloba, anemone americana, thalictrum thalictroides*. (Chapter 17, Chapter 18)

**Aster**: love, daintiness, trust, patience. Native varieties: *symphyotrichum pilosum, symphyotrichum patens, oclemena acuminata, symphyotrichum novae-angliae*. (Chapter 2, Chapter 18)

**Bean**: protection, love. Beans of the genus phaseolus are native to North and South America. Five kinds are domesticated: *phaseolus vulgaris, phaseolus lunatus, phaseolus acutifolius, phaseolus coccineus*, and *phaseolus polyanthus*. (Chapter 7)

**Beebalm** (aka bergamot): money, prosperity, fertility. Native varieties: *monarda fistulosa, monarda clinopodia, monarda didyma*. (Chapter 18)

**Birch**: new beginnings, regeneration, hope. The following species are native to the area: *betula alleghaniensis, betula cordifolia, betula glandulosa, betula lenta, betula minor, betula nigra, betula papyrifera, betula populifolia*, and *betula pumila*. (Chapter 3)

**Blackberry** (aka bramble): sorrow, arrogance, remorse, loss, remembrance. Religious symbolism includes Christ’s crown of thorns, cursed by Lucifer, the purity of the virgin Mary, and the blood of Christ. Native varieties: *rubus flagellaris, rubus odoratus* (Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 18)
**Bladderwort**: no known symbolism. Bladderwort is carnivorous. No native varieties. Not aggressive enough to be considered invasive. Introduced species: *utricularia vulgaris*. (Chapter 2, Chapter 3)

**Buttercup**: humility, neatness, childishness, cheerfulness, wealth. Native variety: *ranunculus abortivus*. Introduced variety: *ranunculus bulbosus* (invasive/nativized). (Chapter 2, Chapter 18)

**Campion**: youthful love. Native variety: *silene stellata*. (Chapter 2)

**Cattail** (aka bulrush, reedmace): lust, peace, prosperity. Native varieties: *typha angustifolia*, *typha latifolia*. (Chapter 1, 2)

**Chamomile**: money, love, sleep, purification, patience. Introduced varieties: *anthemis cotula*, *matricaria discoidea*, *matricaria maritima*. (Invasive/Nativized) (Chapter 2)

**Cinquefoil**: womanhood, maternal love, Mary's womb. Native varieties: *potentilla canadensis*, *potentilla simplex*. (Chapter 2)

**Clover** (aka trefoil): Hope, faith, charity, luck, industry, prosperity. Symbol of the trinity because there are three leaflets. Introduced varieties: *medicago lupulina*, *trifolium repens*, *trifolium pratense*, *trifolium campestre*. (Invasive/Nativized) (Chapter 2)

**Crocus**: childlike delight, preciousness, cheerfulness, new beginnings, foresight. There are no native varieties of crocus. (Chapter 17)

**Corn** (aka maize): sun, harvest, protection. Native variety *zea mays* has been cultivated for thousands of years into subspecies considered better for different food functions. (Chapter 7)

**Crocus**: childlike delight, preciousness, cheerfulness, new beginnings, foresight. There are no native varieties of crocus. (Chapter 17)

**Crown Vetch**: fidelity. Invasive. Introduced variety: *coronilla varia*. (Chapter 7)

**Daisy**: Innocence, childhood, purity, hope, happiness. In Christianity, daisies are a symbol of the Virgin Mary and commemorate her chastity, grace and purity. Also a representation of the innocence of the Christ child. Native varieties: see aster. Introduced variety: *chrysanthemum leucanthemum*. (Invasive, Nativized) (Chapter 1)

**Dandelion**: overcoming hardships. Also considered a symbol of Christ's Passion. Native variety: *krigia biflora*. Introduced variety: *taraxacum officinale*. Dandelions are an invasive so pervasive we're stuck with it here in New York. Even Dean has given up. (Chapter 1)

**Duckweed**: no known symbolism. Castiel uses duckweed in his art, but duckweed is actually an invasive in the United States. No native varieties known. (Chapter 3)

**Elm**: associated with "mother earth," femininity, and strength. Native variety: *ulmus americana*. (Chapter 3)

**Forget-me-not**: true love, faithfulness, memory. Invasive. Introduced variety: *myosotis sylvatica*. (Chapter 3)

**Goldenrod**: caution, encouragement, luck, good fortune, hope, love, faith, valor, wisdom. Native varieties: *solidago flexicaulis*, *solidago altissima* (Chapter 2, Chapter 3)

**Ground ivy** (aka creeping Charlie): hardiness, fidelity, fertility, protection, healing, dependence, endurance, faithfulness, immortality. No native varieties. Introduced variety: *glechoma hederacea*. 
Another extremely common invasive that Dean has given up on controlling. (Chapter 2)

**Hemlock**: longevity, majesty. Native variety: *tsuga canadensis*. (Chapter 3)

**Holly**: heavily associated with Christmas. Suggestive of Christ's crown of thorns, the berries are evocative of the blood of Christ and God's love for humanity. I was not able to find a comprehensive list of native holly species, but the native variety I reference in this story is *ilex opaca*. (Chapter 3)

**Honeysuckle**: fraternal affection, devotion, happiness, a lover’s embrace, bonds of love. Native varieties: *lonicera sempervirens*, *triosteum angustifolium*. (almost every chapter)

**Lichen**: no known symbolism. There are types of lichen native to every habitat in the world, more or less. **Foliose lichens** grow on the stump of the dead willow. (Chapter 1, Chapter 7)

**Lily**: coquetry, flirting, desire, passion, aspirations. Introduced: *hemerocallis fulva*. While there are native varieties of lily, what Castiel imagined is a tiger lily, is not native, and doesn't grow on the Shurley property. (Chapter 3)

**Maple**: balance, love, longevity, money. There are many native varieties of maple tree. *Acer saccharum*, *acer nigrum*, *acer spicatum*, *acer rubrum*, *acer saccharinum*, and *acer pensylvanicum* are most common in the northeast United States. I've bolded the ones growing on the Shurley property. [Full list of native maples here](#). (Chapter 3)

**Meadow rue**: regret, sorrow, repentance. Native varieties: *tephrosia virginiana*, *thalictrum thalictroides*, *thalictrum revolutum*. (Chapter 2)

**Meadowsweet**: love, peace, happiness. Native variety: *spiraea alba*. (Chapter 2)

**Milkweed**: transformation. Native varieties: *asclepias qudrifolia*, *asclepias verticillatta*, *asclepias tuberosa*, *asclepias syriaca*, *asclepias incarnata*. (Chapter 2)

**Mint** (aka germander): suspicion. Native varieties: *pycnanthemum incanum*, *teucrium canadense* (Chapter 2)

**Moss**: charity, maternal love. There are many native varieties of moss; I specifically meant moss in the *bryopsida class*. [Lots of pictures here](#) (Chapter 1, Chapter 7).

**Mountain laurel**: immorality, glory, victory. Native variety: *kalmia latifolia*. (Chapter 18)

**Oak**: wisdom, balance, nobility, endurance in the face of adversity. There are too many native varieties of oak to list here, but the most common are *quercus alba*, *quercus bicolor*, *quercus coccinea*, *quercus macrocarpa*, *quercus rubra*, and *quercus velutina*. [Great source on oaks](#) (Chapter 3, Chapter 5)

**Pine**: birth, abundance, love, fortune, health. There are many native varieties, and they include: *pinus banksiana*, *pinus pungens*, *pinus resinosa*, *pinus rigida*, *pinus strobus*, and *pinus virginiana*. (Chapter 3)

**Poison Ivy**: no known symbolism. Native variety: *toxicodendron radicans*. (Chapter 1)

**Poppy**: eternal sleep, oblivion, imagination, sacrifice. Native Variety: *eschscholzia californica*. (Chapter 2)
Potato: flexibility, healing, sustenance. Multiple wild species are native to North America, but *solanum tuberosum*, the main cultivar, is from South America, was domesticated in Peru and Bolivia and is now widespread. (Chapter 7)

Purple loosestrife: determination, strong will. Invasive. Introduced variety: *lythrum salcaria*. (Chapter 2)

Queen Anne’s Lace (aka wild carrot): sanctuary. Invasive. Introduced variety: *daucus carota*. (Chapter 2)

Raspberry: kindness, blood of the heart, fragility, childbirth, pregnancy. Native variety: *rubus odoratus*. (Chapter 1, Chapter 2)

Redbud: betrayal and remorse. Judas is said to have hung himself from a redbud tree. Native variety: *cercis canadensis*. (Chapter 1, Chapter 18)

Reed: life, purpose, purification, the power of creation, growth. In Christianity, it is a symbol of humiliation. Native variety: *phragmites americanus*. (basically every chapter)

Skullcap: no known symbolism. Native varieties: *scultellaria integrifolia, scultellaria elliptica*. (Chapter 2)

Snowdrop: consolation, hope. Invasive, but naturalized. Introduced variety: *galanthus elwesii* and others. (Chapter 16)

Solomon's seal: named after King Solomon, who was granted wisdom by God according to the Torah. Medicinal. Native variety: *polygonatum biflorum*. (Chapter 2)

Squash: fertility, plenty. Cucurbita was native to South and Mesoamerica, with many varieties cultivated throughout North America before contact with Europeans. Five species are domesticated: *curcurbita argyrosperma, cucurbita ficifolia, cucurbita maxima, cucurbita moschata* and *cucurbita pepo*. (Chapter 7)

Swallow-wort (aka bloodwort, tetterwort): strength, growth, healing. Native variety: *sanguinaria canadensis*. (Chapter 2)

Sweetgum Tree: no known symbolism. Native variety: *liquidambar styraciflua*. (Chapter 3)

Thistle: independence, nobility, warning. Native variety: *cirsium horridulum*. (Chapter 2, Chapter 3)

Tomato: passion. Native to Central and South America, ultimately cultivated throughout the world. The primary cultivated variety is *solanum lycopersicum*. (Chapter 7)

Trillium: rebirth, symmetry, purity. Native varieties: *trillium sessile, trillium flexipes, trillium grandiflorum, trillium undulatum, trillium erectum*. (Chapter 17)

Turtle’s head: no known symbolism. Native variety: *chelone lyonii*. (Chapter 2)

Vervain (aka verbena): healing, creativity, happiness. Native varieties: *verbena simplex, verbena urticifolia*. (Chapter 2)

Violet: humility, faithfulness, modesty. Violets are associated with the virgin Mary and are
sometimes seen as a symbol of her virginity and modesty. Native varieties: *viola hastata, viola sororia, viola canadensis, viola blanda, viola pedata, viola rostrata, viola pubescens, viola palmata, viola bicolor*. (Chapter 1)

**Water Lily**: grief, separation, rebirth, optimism. Native varieties: *nuphar lutea, nymphaea odorata*. (Chapter 3, Chapter 18)

**Wheat**: abundance, life, fertility, rebirth, resurrection. Not native to the area, but none is grown in this story, Castiel just imagines it. (Chapter 2)

**Wild Grape**: fertility. Grapes are associated with the blood of Christ, particularly the Eucharist. Native varieties: *vitis labrusca, vitis riparia, vitis vulpina*. (Chapter 2)

**Willow Tree**: nature, fertility, life, balance, learning harmony, strength, stability; in mythology: moon, water, grief, healing, everlasting life, psychic powers, essence of love. Native varieties: *salix amygdaloides, salix bebbiana, salix discolor, salix interior, salix nigra*. (basically every chapter)

Though Castiel calls the tree by the pond a "weeping willow," the traditional weeping willow is native to China. The tree in the story is a Black Willow, *salix nigra*.

**Sources used:**

- Common Invasive Species in the US
- Flower Meanings
- Flower Symbols
- Invasive Plant Atlas
- New Hampshire Wild Flowers
- Plant and Herb Symbolism
- Plant Symbolism @ Wikipedia
- Religious Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees
- Symbolism Wiki
- US Wildflowers: New York State

(and a whole bunch of others...)

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