Falling

by Castellation

Summary

» NOW COMPLETE «

The Empty

Dean thought it was a joke when Billie the reaper first mentioned it, but after the wracking events in The Empty, he knows it's far from a joke.

With Cas still in The Empty, Dean works around the clock to get Cas back. He swore to himself that he was getting Cas back, and that's a promise he's going to do his damnedest to keep.

But what's to say that Cas is still in one piece?
Read the first story before you read this!!

Notes

Quick note that this is the sequel to It's Written in The Stars, so if you haven't read that story, it won't make sense.

I probably won't update this that frequently since I'm trying to finish another story I've been working on, but I will do my best to at least update once a week, and you can follow me on my Instagram, Twitter and Youtube, all by the name of @ffsmish!

But for now, I hope you enjoy! cx
Fever

One

(Also, the song Empty Man by Orta Gartland is a fitting song for this chapter if you'd like to give it a listen!)

Delirium.

That was something I'd become closely associated with personally.

It was a constant state of being too hot, wanting, wanting, wanting, always wanting. I found myself reaching out for a hazy image often, only to have it slip through my fingers, and I would panic, chasing after it till I was ragged. It was a lost piece of myself that I couldn't quite find, something I couldn't seem to stop searching for through the inky blackness of my blind subconscious.

Falling.

Phase two.

When the delirium faded, a name seeped into my mind - bleeding into every crevice until it was seared into the forefront of my mind - even though I didn't know who it was or what this character looked like.

Cas.

I wanted Cas.

The delirium had given way to blackness, which I fought off and wished would leave everyday, until it did. The empty blackness then suddenly gave way to nightmares, and I prayed for the blackness to return; that quiet, ever encompassing slumber. I prayed for the emptiness over the nightmares, blackness over the vivid colors that would send me screaming in fear and agony.

There was one consistency about my horrific night terrors though, and that was that they always consisted of a man; eyes a pallid blue, touch as soft as a kiss. I didn't know him, didn't remember him, but he seemed familiar, a tugging something on my subconscious that I felt that I should know better than the back of my own hand, and yet, I could only remember trivial things about him - such as the color of his trench coat, his backwards tie. Never anything else. Not the exact shade of his eyes, the color of his hair, or the shape of his shadow.

The image was empty. Hollow. A ghostly figure with no real face.

The nightmares plagued me with this ghostly creature, and they always started with us running - running, running, running, always running. Fear would always choke me with the black creatures that chased us in every dream with their loud cries and blood red eyes, malicious and bloodthirsty.

We needed to get away, we needed to run.

I tripped many times, but the blue eyed creature always caught me, terror bleaching his skin white. He was always there, refusing to let me fall behind and be prey despite all logic and reason saying he should.
But somewhere along the way in every dream, I always managed to injure myself, maiming myself to the point of certain death.

I couldn't go on, and I was holding him back, the beautiful creature who was running with me.

Still, he didn't leave me for dead even though he had all motive to. He would carry or help me into a small room - the same room every dream, no matter how different the journey to it had been - locking us inside before tending to my wounds with gentle, tender fingers, softly hushing me - the only vocalizations he ever made - when the pain was too much.

The nightmares always ended the same; the blue-eyed man sending me away, blue eyes glistening with resolved pain, and it was always when it was too, too late, when I was falling in that deep abyss without him, did I remember his name.

Cas.

The sharp agony that tore through my chest like a hot, barbed blade each time was too much, and I couldn't handle it.

I couldn't handle the fact that each and every time the nightmare happened, I could never save him. It didn't matter how tight I was holding his hands at the end of every dream, he always slipped away from me, and I fell deeper and deeper into that black abyss.

The abyss that the light in his eyes could no longer illuminate, the darkness that his touch could no longer combat.

It killed me, asphyxiated me, and I sank deeper and deeper under that dark, murky water.

And I didn't try resurfacing.

Eventually though, the falling and nightmares faded too, and I became more lucid, beginning to distinguish reality from nightmares.

I began to remember things again, little things coming back to me day by day.

I finally remembered that my name was Dean Winchester, and that I had a younger brother named Sam, and he was my only blood relative, because everyone else was dead, including our parents.

It became normal to remember things, and I started eating again, taking my meals from a caramel skinned, kind, dark haired woman, one who's name I was told was Jazz - a nickname for Jezebel somehow, but I could never remember.

Each day that passed, it became easier to remember things, and eventually, I able to remember what I'd had for breakfast at the beginning of that day, and eventually, dinner the night before, before I could recall events a week prior.

I was starting to remember other things too; when Sam first died, when I drank my first beer, when I first rebuilt the impala.

Despite all the memories that were coming back to me, I would find myself irritated with them, wishing they were something else, though I couldn't say what.

It was about two months after my fever and dementia started receding, when I started having dreams again. Dreams starring a character that I could vaguely remember before my lucidity; Cas. It was about a week and a half later of these dreams happening with this so-called Cas, before I realized after a conversation with Sam about my dementia, that my vivid dreams that I had every night, were memories.

All the hurt, the fights and battles we'd lost and won together, real.

The day we met in that ramshackle barn, sparks and bullets flying, real.

The comfort I'd found in him, his steadfast devotion that could withstand any hurricane force wind thrown at it, his undying friendship, real.
I began to find any excuse to sleep, never wanting to wake up, curious as to what other adventures we shared. Until the dreams began changing.

It terrified me at first when I dreamed of him and I watching some nameless movie, Cas spilling a bottle of beer, leading to our lips meeting for the first time, the shock and mortification so powerful, it sent me startling awake.

I was hesitant to sleep the next night, but eventually, I gave into my weariness, and the dreams continued.

I felt like I was watching films, watching from the outside something beautiful blossom between me and this beautiful creature who went by the name of Cas; I watched our tentative touches transform into hot, languid explorations of skin. I remembered the long nights of ecstasy that left me hot and empty in bed when I woke up, half expecting to see blue eyes looking at me when I turned my head.

Then the dreams took a darker turn, and the terror I could vaguely remember before my lucidity, revived itself.

I remembered Cas and I being thrown in The Empty, and running, running, running.
I remembered those last moments with Cas, my pleas falling upon his deaf ears, his fingers slipping from my grasp, lost in depths I could never reach.

I woke up cold, and the dreams stopped after that, nothing but the blackness that was there when I closed my eyes to sleep, accompanying me.

I threw myself into lore and retracing our footsteps after that, hardly getting any sleep with driving with Sam back to the dreaded place I lost Cas, and reading lore when we stopped at motels, but our trip availed nothing, and the only thing I got for my trouble was an even bigger hole in my chest.

It had been half a year since I'd lost Cas, and Sam caught me up to speed on things, telling me that when Cas and I didn't call or text after four days, him and Jazz had driven up to come find us after our motel had called them, and Nira had somehow disappeared from the bunker around the same time without a trace.

They found the impala at our motel in South Dakota, and the room left no clues on to where we had gone, our things strewn all over the place like we had just walked out and never came back.

Sam told me how him and Jazz had gathered our things, then headed back up to Montana.

They swept the old asylum I spent a year at with Nira, only to find nothing.

Another couple days of searching yielded no clues, and they reluctantly decided to drive back to the bunker.

They didn't expect me to come crashing into the study the night they returned, bloody, incoherent, and delirious.

Cas was nowhere to be found, and despite all Sam and Jezebel's prayers, he never showed.

My chest clenched in anxiety every time I thought of this, knowing the long six months Jazz and Sam had to endure nursing me back to health, knowing nothing.

What hurt even more than that, was knowing that Cas was still out there, lost in The Empty.

I prayed to him every night after I finally remembered who I was, who he was.

I prayed hard, hoping maybe it would help Cas find his way out. I began getting desperate when he never showed after days of praying, and I resorted to trying every religious prayer and meditation method geared to calling angels in an effort to bring him back. I even found lore about Cas, the angel
of Thursday.
Along with it, I found a summoning spell for him - for his goodwill - and I threw my heart into getting everything, my heart pounding the night I set everything out to perform the ritual. I don't think I'd ever felt so small and insignificant as I did then when the spell failed me - the lone candle I had collected weakly burning in the dark, as if tired of constantly combating the darkness around it.
I sat in the dark for hours, watching the candle flicker valiantly, and it wasn't until my vision was too hazy from drunkenness, did I watch it sputter and die.
I had never woken up so empty after a hangover in my life.

I hated sleeping after that, the long nights lying awake. Numb, empty, and hopeless as I remembered the way Cas' hands felt before they slipped from my grasp. I despised sleeping, because sometimes, I dreamed of Cas, and the colors were so vivid and real, I woke up thinking it was real, but as the dream faded and I realized it wasn't real, the hole in my chest would throb for days.
This new hole, this new déjà vu I had, was even worse than loosing Sam to death.
It was worse, because Cas had sent me away.
Cas had shut that door, without even caring that I didn't want that, even if I hadn't known it then. I didn't want to be here, a dead, empty man barely breathing, when I didn't know if he was still breathing elsewhere, and I couldn't do something rash Romeo and Juliet style, because I had Sam. I stayed solely for Sam; I would never leave him that way, it wouldn't be fair.
But it was worse, because despite how hard I tried to keep myself together in front of Sam, I knew he could see right through me.
He didn't know Cas and I had become something more, but I knew that he could see my pain plain as day.
I knew he could probably see that I was a dead man walking, and I hated myself for that.
I hated how I was involuntarily dragging him into the hole I was in, and I knew that the constant angst was killing him too.
I saw it in the ways he would look at me sometimes, eyes a dull, mournful hazel.
At least if I was dead with Cas, he'd have closure, some sense of understanding, some sort of foothold on a cliff to help pull himself back up.
Sam couldn't have that when I was still there, dead and pining for Cas each and every day, the smell of him long gone from his bed, pillows and clothes, his flowers he'd collected dead.
The only thing that I even had to really remind myself that he was real, that I wasn't still in some crazy, druggie dream, were the pictures I had on my phone, and our photo booth pictures.
The edges of the film row of the photo booth pictures were crinkled, a crease in the middle of the third picture from the one time I'd accidentally bent it by sleeping on it in one of my drunken stupors.
I never went anywhere without those pictures, the photos becoming a talisman of some sort for me, there for me to look at when I couldn't handle the heavy blackness in my chest at times.
When the crushing defeat of yet another lore book yielded nothing, or another goose chase to find Nira again yielded no results, the pictures on my phone or the photo booth pictures I always kept with me would bring me back, put a whole new fever in finding him.

Time passed. Six months turned into seven. Then eight. Then nine. Then ten.

Time kept on rolling, and the day I'd lost Cas grew farther and farther away, and it killed me.
There never was a day that I didn't feel that anxiety, that time was ticking, that maybe I would be a day too late in saving him.
I scoured the entire bunker, each and every single book, every library and bookstore I encountered on hunts, but nothing.
It didn't matter how many covens I hunted down and killed my way through, there wasn't a damn witch, warlock, monster or demon who had heard of or seen Nira.
It didn't matter that there were times I could see how scared Sam was with my careless, ruthless
nature during hunts, or how it used it scare me. I didn't care about the countless interventions I was tried to be given from Sam, Jazz, and countless other hunters who I didn't have names for.

I didn't care when a hunter or two, or a lone woman at the bar would hit on me, I just couldn't do it. I found myself constantly criticizing them - that the shade of that girl's blue eyes were the wrong color. That guy was built like Cas, but his smile was wrong. That girl had the same hair color as Cas, but it wasn't wavy, and that guy acted a bit like Cas, but everything else was wrong.

I saw pieces of Cas everywhere, and it killed me that I couldn't collect all the pieces to put him back together.

The only person who seemed to understand my pain, was Rayne, this hunter I'd rescued from a coven a few months back.

I helped her avenge the death of her son, Jessie, who had been taken by her possessed boyfriend to a coven of witches and killed.

She knew what I felt, that big, gaping hole.

I knew Sam understood having lost Jess, but he didn't know that Cas was more than my best friend, and I could be honest with Rayne, her soft, gentle nature much like Cas', and made me feel that he was there, still watching over me through someone else.

It was over a full year later, when Rayne and I did a hunt together, typical run of the mill exorcism, which turned out to be a whole underground operation of people unwittingly selling their souls, did I finally have a breakthrough.

After Rayne fell asleep later that night in our motel room, I slipped out, walking to the impala and gathering some things before walking down by the river, setting out the ritual.

A few mixing of herbs, and a puff of red smoke later, Crowley was standing before me.

"Dean," he said, a coy smile on his face. "It's been a long time, I was beginning to think you'd forgotten all about little old me."

He swirled the whiskey glass he had in hand, the ice clinking against the glass.

"I need a favor." 

"A favor? Who do I look like to you, the Good Samaritan?" He scoffed, taking a swig from the cup, scrutinizing me.

"I need you to bring Cas back."

"Ah, yes, I've heard about your little- heartbreak," he drawled, taunting me with the word, and I scowled. "A little birdie told me that the eldest Winchester has completely lost his marbles- emotionally wise," he gestured to me with an indifferent wave of his hand. "I gotta say, I thought you were already crazy Dean, but from what I'm hearing." He chuckled darkly, and I sighed in aggravation.

"Can you bring Cas back, or not." I hissed, ignoring the familiar, yet still blinding pain in my chest at his name, and I could see that Crowley saw it.

"Is it true that he's stuck in The Empty?" Crowley had his atypical poker face, derisively drinking his whiskey.
I nodded, forcing back down the memories, crossing my arms.

Crowley nodded, looking down at the Devil's trap he was in, rocking on the balls of his feet.

"You see Dean, as much as I'd love to help you get your feathered lover back, I can't," he gazed languidly down at his glass, flicking a bug away from it.

"What do you mean you 'can't'?" I growled.

"The Empty is much like Purgatory, only impossible to find without the help of a reaper," he smirked at me. "Only reapers can go to The Empty, and I doubt that you know of any reaper willing to be your knight in shining armor and go joust for you."

"Then find me one, you son of a bitch!"

He chuckled, finishing his glass of whiskey, passively watching me as I stepped closer to him.

"I came here to make a deal with you," I growled, my fist clenching tighter around the angel blade I was holding, lifting it to rest on his throat. "Either give me what I want, or hell is gonna be lookin' for a new king."

Outwardly, he was as cool as ever, but I could see the cowardly flash of fear in his eyes, and he pushed my hand away, brushing off his suit.

"You certainly haven't gotten soft after your angel left your bed, haven't you?"

He smirked wickedly, and I said nothing, knowing he wasn't wrong and hating it.

"I think we can work something out."
Habits of the Heart

Chapter Notes

Ahh sorry for the delayed update, I'm currently handling tedious family issues, as well as struggling with writers block for this fic unfortunately...

But here's a new chapt for you all! thank you guys for reading and the kudos as well! :)

Two

"Hey Dean."

I turned around from hoping to score a sneaky creep back to bed from my midnight stroll, but with no such luck. Rayne had apparently been waiting up for me, and by the looks of it, had boiled in oil for the past hour or so I'd been gone.

"Rayne," I nodded to her, locking the motel room door and walking to my bed. "Care to tell me where you've been?"

"Out."

"No shit Sherlock - where?"

"Down by that lake over there, I needed to clear my head," I half lied.

Rayne had an insane knack for knowing lies - she said it was her, "mom abilities" - which I firmly believed there was no such thing; until she would always point out the fact that my childhood was practically void of motherly intervention, so I would shut up after that. I was hoping a half lie would pass her inner polygraph, but with her eyes narrowing infinitesimally with a cynical scowl, I knew my odds of her believing me were slim to none.

I sighed.

"What, do you need me to blog about it?"

"Vlog."

"What?"

"It's when- never mind," she sighed, crossing her arms. "What's up Dean?"

"Nothing."

"Really? So the fact that you look like you just won the lottery means nothing?"

I rolled my eyes, dropping my duffel bag on the side of my bed, walking over to my other duffel bag I kept clothes in, Rayne following me with soft footsteps.
"Damn, I'd sure like to know who you summoned to snag winning lottery tickets." I turned around to see that she was holding one of the bags of summoning herbs we kept, a torpid look on her face.

I sighed heavily.

"Rayne-"

"Don't Rayne me! Who did you summon?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Just because I'm a woman and about a decade shorter than you, don't think I won't kick your ass," she hissed, tossing my duffel bag to the floor.

"Fine," I snapped, sitting down heavily on the edge of my bed, rubbing my face. "I summoned Crowley."

"Run that by me again please."

I scowled.

"You heard me. Happy?"

She sighed in exasperation and I leaned down to untie my shoes.

"Why? What could you possibly want with him? Hasn't he been leaving you and Sam alone since the Almighty deal like three years ago?"

"Four," I corrected her, putting aside my left shoe. "And information."

"Information? But-" she trailed off, and I could almost hear the puzzle pieces click together in her head. "You mean... about- him?"

Rayne and I had a unspoken, respected agreement, and she was the only one who knew it.

Never say the names of the lost, never say the name of her murdered son, never say the name of the creature that was once my everything.

And was now the keeper of everything I had lost...

"Yeah.." I said softly, focusing on the tan threads that made up my shoelace; all in tiny braids, twisting and weaving itself into one.

"Anything...?"

"Nothing on.. that," I put aside my right shoe, taking a breath as I sat back up straight. "But a lead - Crowley has a location spell to find Deyanira."

"You told him you'd think about it, right?" Rayne brushed back her royal purple, curly hair back, her silver ring on her left middle finger glinting in the light.

I stood up, Rayne stepping back to give me room, and I could feel her eyes on me as I opened up my duffel bag, pulling out a change of clothes.

"I'm leaving in the morning," I pulled out a t-shirt, dropping it to the side, digging around for some
"I want you to stay."

"Over my stubborn ass," she snapped irascibly. "He's a demon Dean, and he happens to rule his utopian version of hell? Any of this raising warning flags?"

"I know what I'm doing."

"That's the last thing my ex said to me before Jessie was killed-" she choked on her words, the both of us falling silent.

"I'm not your ex Rayne," I remarked finally, taking my change of clothes and walking into the bathroom, Rayne a stone and saying nothing.

I knew I should comfort her, hug her, or say some sappy shit that women liked, but I knew Rayne, and saw much of myself in her.

I knew no hugs, no pacific, empathic words or phrases would bring her peace, nor would any talk of halcyon days.

I knew just as well as her, that those holes, those déjà vu's that would stab you right in the gut when you least expected it, were permanent.

Sure, I'd had decades of practice patching them up, and in rare cases, getting them to heal, but I knew there was no recipe, no magic potion, no special phrases that could heal loss that was as deep as the engrained necessity for a heart to beat.

I could finally understand what people had meant in songs and movies when they went through some sort of loss from a lover, that they couldn't breathe.

I never realized how much Cas was a part of me, how deeply he had buried himself inside me. Cas had become the very air I had needed to breathe, and I didn't even know it, not until he was gone, and I was choking.

It was a terrifying realization, suddenly knowing, that everything inside you needed air; your blood, your lungs, your heart, your muscles, your brain, your organs, your very bones. It wasn't until you were subjugate to their life's breath, did you realize that it had become yours. And it was never until you lost them, did you ever know how deeply branded they were within you. Cas was a memory, a presence, a tiny blip of air, that was forever fused inside me, and as time ticked and ticked on without him, I could feel the memories of him growing dimmer each day.

It didn't feel like I could breathe, because he wasn't there to make me feel alive.

He was no longer there to make my skin tingle like I'd just been shocked, he was no longer there to calm me with his voice, his manner of speech or claim me in the night.

He was gone, just so abruptly and entirely gone, it felt impossible to just heal from the tribulation.

It was such a hard line to walk; on one hand, I wanted to move on, to find some sort of closure and remember what it was like to breathe again, but on another, it terrified me.

The habits of the heart never wanted to forget, never wanted me to forget the exact shade of his eyes, the time he first said he'd loved me, the way I'd felt when we'd first made love.

I couldn't forget, because if I did, Cas as a memory would die, and if it was the only way he was even alive now, I would tear myself to pieces to keep him with me.
Even if I had to sell my soul for it.

I didn't even realize how deep in thought I had gotten until the water ran cold, yanking me back to the present.
I fumbled to turn off the water, pushing back the shower curtain and grabbing a towel.
Several minutes later, I was dressed and had brushed my teeth, walking out of the bathroom, sighing heavily to see Sam and Jazz sitting on Rayne's bed, Rayne in a chair.

"Is this a party?" I forced a chuckle, brushing back my damp hair. "Just let me get my record player."

"Dean, what did you do?" Sam butts in.

"Hi, nice to see you too younger brother, and his lovely girlfriend." I nodded to Jazz, who gave me a small smile.

"Dean, just tell us. No games. Rayne told us you summoned Crowley - why?"

"If she told you everything, you should know." I sat on the side of my bed, the springs creaking in protest to my weight, and I tried not to think of that one night Cas and I spent tangled in each other, the storm raging outside and the bed creaking nearly covering the sounds of his pleasure, but not quite.

I swallowed thickly, trying to bury the lump in my throat.

"At what cost," Sam sighed now, face contorted in frustration and empathy. "You know as well as I do he always gets paid."

"I have to do a job for him."

"What kind?"

"That's my concern."

"Dean!" Sam exclaimed in annoyance. "Like I'm letting you do this alone."

"You are."

"Why are you making this so difficult Dean? I know loosing Cas is hard, I miss him too, but don't think you have to go at it alone."

There it was.

That abrupt, hits-you-when-you-least-expect-it slash of a saber.
I knew Sam didn't mean it, but the blow was fresh and agonizing all the same, and I could see that Rayne knew it out of the corner of my eye.

"This is something I have to do Sam," I rubbed my hand over my chin, trying to hold myself together.

"Dean-"

"Damn it Sam, just leave it!" I yelled, waving him off. "Rayne can come with me if you're so damn concerned."

"Fine but-"
"Sam, just get out."

"Dean-"

"Sam!" I exclaimed, rolling over onto my bed. "Just leave."

Silence, wearing and tense, before a heavy sigh.

"Fine, we'll talk about this in the morning," Sam said, and I could hear footsteps as him and Jazz got up.

I said nothing, listening to the door lock after they left, then Rayne's soft footfalls as she walked back over to her bed, the bedsheets crinkling as she pulled them back.

I was accepting that it would probably be another sleepless night, and I was waiting for Rayne to turn the lamp off, but she didn't, and I could hear her shifting in the other bed.

"Dean?"

"What." I muttered, wishing she'd let me alone.

"He didn't mean it."

"I know."

"I won't tell you what you already know, but we're just looking out for you."

"I knew that."

"Shut up Dean."

I couldn't help but chuckle at that, rolling on my back, looking over at her, Rayne leaning her head on her crossed arms - her long hair up in one of those ridiculous buns she called 'a pineapple' - as she looked at me.

"I can never take you seriously when your head grows twice its size."

She rolled her eyes.

"It's called a pineapple, Dean, women do it to keep their hair looking pretty overnight."

"Are you trying to make me hungry for a fruit that eats your tongue alive?"

She sighed, and I chuckled.

"So, you okay?" She asked softly, pushing back her bangs.

I sighed, looking up at the popcorn ceiling, making patterns and constellations out of the bumps.

"Is there ever really a right answer for that?"

She took a breath, which I knew was her form of silent agreement.

"I know you were probably just saying it to get Sam off of you, but I'm coming with you to help you with Crowley. You need someone to watch your dumbass back." She chuckled lightly, but I could underlying uncertainty in her voice.
"I'll be fine," I replied, because that was what I always said.

"Not without me."

"I was before."

"Ouch. I hope you didn't treat halo that way."

I took a breath, Cas' warm smile coming into my mind, and I reached for my jacket next to me, fingering the photo row in the pocket.

"Worse, sometimes," I said softly. "We've both been pretty fucking terrible to each other."

"But you love him."

I was quiet for a moment, feeling that familiar crease in the middle photo.

"Yeah." I said softly, barely even loud enough to hear it myself.

"What's that...? If you don't mind me asking."

"What?"

"That," she pointed to my hand in my jacket pocket, a corners of the photo row peeking out.

"Oh," I pulled out the photo strip, Cas' bright smile in the first picture sending a bittersweet pang through me, leaning over the edge of my bed to hand it to her. "Just some pictures of- him, and I. It was his idea, because I didn't want to do it."

She gently took the pictures, holding them under the light, gasping softly.

"What?" I exclaimed, leaning back forward, fear rippling through me that something was wrong.

"He's beautiful.." she said softly, a fond look in her eyes as she looked over the pictures. "Did you guys kiss after?"

"No," I flushed.

"Hmm," she hummed. "I see now why you're so crazy about him; how come you've never shown me these before?"

"You never asked," I replied, taking the pictures back when she offered them, putting them back in the safety of my jacket pocket.

"Oh, so you're one of those people."

"What?"

"Never mind. Tell me, what was your first kiss like?"

I flushed, a pang of pain pulsing through me at the memory, wishing Cas was here now to fix me.

"You know what, forget it. What uh, what was he like?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't want to, or don't want to share feelings?"
I scowled at her, but she gazed at me non-judgmentally, patient and placid, before I looked away.

"I don't want to."

"Because it'll hurt later?"

I looked back over at her, then looked away, taking a breath.

"It hurts all the time.."

"I know, but talking does help a bit."

"Who are you trying to convince?"

She was silent.

"I just want to know about him I guess. I can see how much you love him. I just want to start coloring the figure I have of him in my mind."

She shrugged, and I took a breath, trying not to think of Cas, trying not to remember what he smelled like, what his laugh sounded like, what he would be talking about if he was here with me.

Rayne turned off the light after a few more moments, plunging us into the dim light, and although a part of me wanted to tell her all about Cas, and probably make a fool of myself doing so, I just couldn't. Just remembering was ripping me apart, and I couldn't take it. I couldn't take the loneliness without him, the void he left, just him. There were a lot of things pain made you realize, the enlightenment. But the one thing it hit me with most, was gone, he's gone, he's gone.

And I didn't know how to bring him back.

I felt myself seemingly shatter apart within, and I took a breath, rolling to my side, pulling my jacket with the pictures in the pockets to me, hoping it could ease some of my pain.

It didn't.
Three

The next morning after packing all our things, Rayne and I went out to breakfast with Sam and Jazz; Rayne making it her ultimatum that I fill everyone in before we did anything.

I reluctantly agreed, and an hour later, the four of us were seated in a booth at the iHop across the street from the motel, waiting for our food.

"So," Sam said, draping his arm around Jazz's shoulders, and she leaned into him. "Crowley has a spell for finding Nira?"

"Yeah," I nodded, drinking my black coffee, wishing I had a beer instead.

"What's the job?"

"He needs me to go to one of his compounds. Sweep the place."

"Why?"

"Just needs me to look over it, and find some demon minion of his."

Sam furrowed his brow over his cup of coffee, Jazz mirroring his expression.

"So... he wants you to be his messenger boy?"

I rolled my eyes.

"If it gets me Nira, I don't give a damn." I swore, my chest twisting, knowing Cas was still out there, and because of her.

"Even clean his floors with your tongue?" Sam teased, but I knew he was trying to keep me from thinking of Cas as the waiter brought our food.

"Shut up Sam," I muttered over my mouthful of eggs, but I knew I would do even that if it meant getting him back.

"So," Jazz said after a small silence. "When do we leave?"

"It has to be just Rayne and I," I nibbled on my bacon. "Crowley said no deal if I brought, *the whole bloody bunker*."

Sam sighed heavily.

"I should go with you Dean."

"Hey, I'm offended." Rayne chipped in, crossing her arms and there was a collective chuckle at the table.

"You should be," I chuckled, tussling Rayne's hair and she slapped my hand away. "She's a damn good hunter Sammy."
"I know," he chuckled. "But don't you think I should go with you instead? We both know Crowley's tricks, not saying you're incapable Rayne." Sam clarified with a small smile at her.

"I get it," Rayne smiled a little, looking over at me as I looked away.

"You've got a girlfriend Sam-"

"That's no excuse Dean." Sam cut me off.

"-And neither of us have someone to worry about hurting if it goes wrong."

Silence.

"You have me and Jazz, Dean," Sam said shortly.

"You know what I mean," I said softly, staring down at my empty plate, and as I was feeling myself drift off into the memory of Cas and I agreeing to tell Sam about us, Rayne gently squeezed my hand soothingly under the table, bringing me back to the present.

"I do." Sam sighed, brushing back his shoulder length long hair with his fingers.

"You need a haircut Sam," Rayne teased, lightening the mood when no one spoke.

"I do not," he scowled, the heavy atmosphere that had been clouding over the table slowly dissipating.

"He probably likes it long because Jazz tugs on it," I whispered conspiratorially at Rayne with a wink, and she burst out laughing while Sam sighed in annoyance, Jazz merely smiling.

"Shut up."

"It's true, isn't it?" I grinned at Jazz, who shrugged nonchalantly.

"That's for me and Sam to know and you to wonder."

"Oh, spicy." I chuckled, Jazz rolling her eyes.

We ate the rest of our breakfast saying nothing more about me and Rayne's escapade later, conversation as warm and comfortable as it usually was.

After we finished eating, I went with Sam to help pay for our meal while the girls stayed at the table, and I knew Sam's pinched expression was him worrying, but I didn't comment on it. It wasn't until I was about to walk back to the table, when he finally stopped me like I had been expecting him to.

"Dean, wait," Sam said softly, stuffing his wallet into his back pocket. "Are you sure this is a good idea? Crowley has screwed us ten times over, there isn't some other way?"

"Don't you think we would've found it by now Sam?" I scowled. "Cas has been gone for over a year!"

"I know, Dean," Sam pulled me off to the side, looking at a couple who gave us an odd look as they passed, as I had raised my voice louder than I meant to. "And I want him back too, believe me, but I know that he would agree not at the cost of you doing something stupid."

Sam, I would sell my soul again to get him back...

I sighed heavily, looking over at the tables and people eating, watching Rayne and Jazz laugh about
something.

"Let's just go, Crowley isn't gonna wait for me all day," I muttered, walking back towards our booth. I knew Sam wanted to protest to this, but I cut off his opportunity making it back to the table.

"Ready to head out?" I nodded at Rayne, her and Jazz looking up at me as I returned.

"Yeah, if you are," Rayne affirmed, smiling over at Jazz. "I guess I'll see you guys later?"

"Yeah, text us every hour and call if anything," Jazz pleaded, intertwining her caramel skinned fingers with Sam's as he returned to the table, sitting next to her with the same constipated expression.

"We will." Rayne promised, and I ignored Sam's probing stare.

"Be safe."

Rayne and I nodded to them, turning to make our way out of the restaurant, the chilly late December air hitting us like daggers. We quickly rushed over and got inside the impala, slamming the doors behind us and I was quick to start the car.

"Why can't your heater get warm faster?" Rayne whined as she turned on the heater while I backed out of the parking spot.

"Hey, don't hate on Baby," I shook my head, patting her dashboard affectionately. "What do you expect with a classy lady like her?"

"Oh shut up Dean." I laughed as Rayne rolled her eyes. "So, where are we headed?"

"About six hours west to Amarillo, Texas."

"Crowley has a compound there?"

"No, he sent me to do his groceries."

"Jesus Dean- what exactly are we even doing? Can't Crowley find his missing pet himself? Or send someone to do it, or is hell runnin' low on demons?"

"Well," I sighed, turning and accelerating as I entered the highway. "Not exactly."

"What do you mean?" She asked warily, aiming the heater vents towards her.

"Crowley didn't send us to find a missing sulfur bag."

"He- Dean, why did you lie?"

"Because I knew Sam would blow a fuse if I told him," I rested my wrist on the steering wheel, putting the impala into overdrive. "I knew you would understand."

"Dean, I think you're starting to take advantage of my battle-scar empathy-"

"No, I don't mean that, not entirely," I licked my bottom lip, trying to form my words. "I knew that you would understand doing whatever it takes to get that person back."
She was silent, inhaling shakily, like she was seconds away from a breakdown.

"I do," she said finally, and I could feel her gaze on me. "But don't think for a second I'll let you do something reckless."

"You can't stop me."

"You think Cas would want you to?!"

His name hit me like a ton of bricks, the air rushing out of my lungs, my chest shrinking in on itself as the pain squeezed me with its cruel hand, reminding me of its hold it had on me.

"I'm going to-" I said softly, clearing my throat and starting over. "I'm going to get the information he wants, one way or another."

"You- wait... you don't mean..."

I said nothing, merely keeping my eyes on the road, and she gasped.

"Dean... no. Torture?"

I shifted awkwardly, saying nothing.

"Dean! Evil bastard or not, you know that's bad. Please," she grabbed my forearm, gray-blue eyes boring into mine. "Don't..."

I took a breath, looking away.

"I have to. You don't have to watch, just be there for when I come back out."

"But you won't."

I exhaled heavily, flicking on the windshield wipers as snow began to fall.

"Like I came back after I was sent back here."

She said nothing, a thick silence enveloping us as we headed into the storm.

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A few rest stops later and after an aggravating application of tire chains for the snow, we made it to Amarillo, Rayne not saying another word to me. We had to drive to the outskirts of the city to find the abandoned warehouse Crowley gave me the address to, the storm still raging.

I parked the impala in the back once we found it, the air freezing cold as Rayne and I were escorted into the ramshackle warehouse by two demons. The broken down warehouse was not as dilapidated on the inside as it was outside, the air warm and toasty as soon as we stepped inside.

"Ah Dean. Lady.." Crowley greeted us as the demons shut the door behind us.

"Alright, I'm here." I sighed bitterly. "Let's get this show on the road."

"Where's moose? I expected him and not-" he broke off, scrutinizing Rayne with an indifferent, indolent gaze. "This."
"The name is Rayne," she scowled, crossing her arms.

"I'm sure you're lovely dear," Crowley said sardonically before turning his gaze to me. "So, the little bastard is in the other room."

He motioned for us to follow him, and we did, trekking down a long hallway, through an old hanger with rusting machines before we made it to another office wing. Crowley walked up to a door before stopping, nodding into the room.

"There's your task."

I peered through the tiny window in the door, a pale guy strung supine in the center of a devil's trap, head lulling forward with either unconsciousness, or weariness.

"What do you want with him?" I queried, stepping back and crossing my arms over my chest, Rayne peering inside the room.

"Oh come on Dean, it's business. My end of the bargain is in that room." He jerked his head in the direction of the room.

"What do you mean?" I asked warily, trying to ignore the flutter of hope in my chest.

"That worthless sack of filth was helping your dear little witch you're hunting. He was giving her the finest of my collection to use." He pursed his lips in aggravation with a sigh.

I swallowed thickly, looking back into the room at the limp body.

"So, you want me to ask him why he broke up with you or something?"

"No squirrel, I want you to make an example of the friggin moron, and find out where The Book of The Damned is."

"The what?" Rayne exclaimed, and I shook my head to tell her to keep quiet.

"So, you've replaced wings," Crowley mused, a quirk of a smirk at the corner of his lips as he looked between us, before looking back at me. "You had your fun rolling in the sheets?"

"Why should I give it to you The Book of The Damned?" I ignored his remark, uncrossing my arms.

"Because, my lovely mother happens to be the only witch on earth who can read the accursed thing. Don't you think that that in that impudent head of yours that we should find it before she does? Or before the witch my own mother is jealous of, learns how to read it?"

"And just why should I give it to you? You'd still give it to Rowena."

"Do you think I've forgotten what transpired the last time we read from the book? Moron!" Crowley yelled, eyes black and belligerent, staring at me like I was the most moronic thing to ever breathe air.

I rolled my eyes, unimpressed with his bluster.

"As if that would stop you."

"Do you want your bed warmer back, or not?" He smirked, a wicked gleam in his eye.

I wanted to stab him, punch that smug ass grin off of his face, because Cas was more than just my lover, he always had been.
But as much as I wanted to, I knew my temper would get me nowhere, and bring me no closer to finding Cas.

"So you want the book, done," I recrossed my arms. "What's in it for me?"

"If you had been listening and not pathetically agonizing over your lost angel, you would realize, that the lad in that room was the last living thing to see your bounty."

I jerked my gaze to look at the guy in the room, cold cognizance chilling my blood.

"Ah, now I'm triggering something," Crowley smirked. "I eagerly await the results."

A blink of an eye, and he was gone, the two demon accomplices that had silently been our dark shadows leaving the room.

"You can't be serious.." Rayne said as soon as the door closed behind the demons, my eyes trained on the guy in the room.

"Deadly," I affirmed lowly, the guy in the room lifting his head up for the first time, his button up shirt half buttoned, exposing his thin chest, as well as a large scar across the heart, an old wound no human could've survived. "The host is dead anyways."

Rayne peeked inside the room, a small, gibing smirk twisting his features into an vile sneer that had Rayne taking subjugate steps back in response, staring torpidly at the floor.

"It's still a living being Dean.."

"I would've thought you of all people understood they are anything but living," I mused imprudently. I knew my remark hurt her with her sharp inhale, but I couldn't find it in myself to care.

"Just because my son is dead partially because of one, does not mean that I will cynically hate each and every demon," she choked out the word, my eyes locked with the man bound in the room, brown orbs belligerently prideful. "They all were human once."

"Just because they had a fairy tale beginning, does not mean they have a happy ending," I muttered, opening the door. "Don't wait up for me."

She said nothing, letting me go as I walked into the room, closing the door behind me.

"Dean Winchester, I've heard much about you," the demon said, watching my every move as I stepped into the room, looking over the silver table neatly layered in an assortment of blades, crosses, needles, and a bottle of holy water and salt. Each and every demon weakness.

"I'm Lester, and I gotta say, I'm one of your biggest fans."

"Shut up," I commanded, picking up one of the needles and inspecting it. "I've got some questions for you, and you can either make this really easy on yourself and answer them," I filled needle with holy water, watching the water level rise inside it. "Or, I can autograph every inch of your skin with everything on on this table." I gestured to the assortments of items, shrugging at him.

"You see, Dean," Lester said as I stepped forward to stand in front of him. "As much as I admire your work, and boy, I do," he roved his eyes over me with a demeaning smirk, and I felt a chill rush up my spine. "You see, there's just one little problem."

He jerked his head down to the scarred up gash over his heart, the angry, pale skin in grisly bubbles.
"My loyalty to Deyanira is bound to her in blood," he smirked cockily, leaning back on the metal sheet he was chained to. "She knows quite a few spells, that woman. Most I didn't know, and I was an A plus student in demon Sunday school." He chuckled, gazing down at the floor before meeting my eyes again, face bleeding with defiance. "I would love to see what the Dean Winchester has got."

"Well, if you went to demon history class and took notes, then you should know that Alistair was a black belt in the art of torture down in hell," I flicked at the tip of the needle, Lester hissing at the drops of holy water landing on his skin. "And if you did, and are as big of a fan as you say," I rested the needle on his skin, letting him feel the sharp tip of it, but I didn't push it into his skin, letting him feel the tight anticipation of fear as he didn't know when I would push it into his skin with a smirk. "Then you should know that you don't want this at all."

"Kiss my ass Winchester," he spat, eyes blazing with spite and hate.

"Don't tempt me." I chuckled darkly, sinking the needle into his skin.

_________________

Hours passed, and as promised, I used every single item on that cart, the walls reverberating with Lester's screams and curses, wishing me hell of the worst kind.

I was tentative with my demands at first, as I couldn't help but feel how wrong this entire scenario was, and just knowing how horrified Cas would've been.

It reminded me of when I tortured Alistair years ago, the feeling of dragging dull blades across skin, the hot warmth of blood dripping onto my skin, the sweat, the sounds, the sultry, ironlike stench of blood and sulfur in the air. It had been the first time I had tortured since hell, and as much as I had hated myself then, God, and the angels for saying it was, "a good cause", a sick, vile part of me enjoyed it, thirsted for it.

It was a deep, black part of me that I had wished I could kill, wished it had never been born in the depths of hades at the hand of a blade. An immoral part of me birthed in the shedding of innocent blood.

While a part of me then was rejecting it, holding myself back from that precipice, another part of me took pleasure in Alistair's pain as I had tortured him.

It thirsted for his screams, his agony, his blood, to get payback for what he'd turned me into, what his kind had done to my family, what he'd done to my dad.

It was like the time I had become a vampire, except I thirsted for agony, rather than blood.

I had thrived on the turmoil, the hate, the bitterness in hell. A vampire for pain.

I hated myself for it, and I hated that I could feel that same deep, sultry blackness in the edges of my mind as I tortured Lester, and I hated that I could feel myself falling into that spite.

It took me awhile to realize that it wasn't Azazel, or Alistair that made me a pain vampire. It wasn't Sam dying, mom dying, or even me going to hell.

It was my anger, my hate, that changed me into something I couldn't recognize.

They had just found the right switch and presented it to me to flip.

And I had.

I had hoped to god that I would never torture on that level again, but yet, here I was, under the flag of corrupted good causes.
I was loosing my momentum when even after I had brought out the demon blade and cutting and carving hours later, I was still at square one, only with a much bloodier Lester. I was thinking of bowing out, but I knew that I had no other leads to finding Cas, and it was hard to keep myself on track. That is, until Lester, who had been tossing and spitting unsuccessful gibes and insults in my face for the last couple hours, said his name.

"Man, I wonder what your angel buddy, Castiel, is doing."

I had ignored him, pouring holy water onto the demon blade and he chuckled, humming to himself. "I bet he's laid out gutted somewhere like roadkill."

I snarled then, spinning around and shoving the blade against his throat, pinning his head up to the wall.


"Oh," he laughed, indifferent to the fact that a simple move from me would end his life. "Can't stand the thought of your beloved piece of ass getting torn up by someone other than you?"

He had gasped when I pushed the blade harder against his neck, blood trickling down his neck in rivulets around the edges of the blade.

"Don't." I hissed, and for the first time, I saw Lester's eyes widen in terror. "You dare presume to know what I think," he choked slightly as I pressed the knife harder against his skin. "Or say his name. You don't deserve to say it."

The switch.

Lester had found it, and just like the demons of my past, presented it to me.

And god help me, I fucking flipped it.

Time slipped away in a hazy crimson blur, chokes and screams vibrating through my ears.

"I don't think I heard you," I sneered with a laugh.

"The book... its-its in her old lab.. b-back in Kansas.." Lester choked, spitting blood, holy water and salt to the floor.

"Where is Nira?" I hissed, yanking his head back by his hair, and he swore as the cut on his neck split open again.

"I-I don't know- the last time I saw her, she was in California!" He screamed as I dribbled holy water over his wounds. "S-She told me to meet her this Friday.. Deliver h-her package, in San Fransico, fisherman's wharf, at the old abandoned fish factory."

He choked for air, gasping as I stepped back, putting aside the holy water.

"What package?"

"T-the blood of a reaper, and a l-leviathan."

"Why?"
"She didn't tell me! T-that's all I know, I swear."

"Do you have the bloods?"

"C-Crowley has it. Now can I go? Please, I-I've told you everything."

"Don't worry, I believe you," I plunged the demon knife into his heart, Lester gasping and convulsing with last breaths. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

After one last twist from the demon knife, Lester stopped breathing.

I wiped off the blade, wiping away the blood from my cheek, exhaling, Lester limp in his chains.

Pocketing the demon knife, I turned, walking out of the room, Rayne rushing up to me as soon as I closed the door behind me.

"God Dean... what have you done?"

I said nothing, looking around for one of Crowley's demon doormats, Rayne gasping in horror behind me.

"Dean, you killed him."

"I got what we need." I opened the door to the hanger, the two demons looking over at me. "Call Crowley, I know where the book is."
After filling in Crowley the details, Rayne and I got back on the road again after I changed into fresh clothes, burning my old set of clothes since they were saturated in blood and beyond salvation. It was going to be a good two day drive to California, and with Friday being a little less than forty eight hours away, I had to hustle.

"Are you gonna talk to me at all?" I turned down the radio, glancing over at Rayne, who'd barely said a word since we left.

She said nothing, just pulled my leather jacket tighter around her shoulders, curling into the door, looking outside the window.

"Rayne."

"Leave me alone Dean."

I frowned, glancing back out the windshield.

"I'm sorry for lying to you... I had no choice."

"That's bullshit Dean and you know it."

I chewed on my bottom lip, flexing my fingers over the steering wheel, knowing that she was, in fact, right.

"I know," I sighed, Aerosmith faintly playing through the speakers, who I hadn't listened to since the day I lost Cas. "I'm sorry I lied, and I'm sorry about what I said about your ex... I had no right, and it was out of line."

"Damn right it was," she muttered, and I chuckled slightly.

"Rayne, can I ask you something?"

I saw her sit up slowly from the corner of my eye, brushing back her hip length long hair.

"What..?" She said warily.

"What was he like? Jessie?"

I glanced over at her, her eyes far away, her minds eye seeing for her now, carrying her back in time, a small smile on her face.

"He was beautiful," she said softly, resting her head on her hand. "He had these big blue eyes like his daddy, dimples, and the most unruly hair ever. He would never let me touch it." She laughed, clearing her throat. "He looked like he had a giant tumbleweed on top of his head, and his laugh-" she broke off, exhaling heavily with a shuddering breath, but I said nothing, letting her work through it.

"He was very smart," she finally continued, and I glanced over at her, gray eyes glimmering each time we passed under a street light. "And he loved exploring, got into everything, my god. He
wanted to learn everything and anything, no matter the cost. He was a handful, but he was my handful." She exhaled, her breaths soft in the quiet; faint over the soft chords of Aerosmith. "I loved how much he was like his dad, before he got into the bad crowd; just happy, lively. Jessie was all I had when I had to cast his father out of his life for my sanity. I had no one else, and I thought I would never love again, but Jessie changed that. Jessie taught me that love doesn't have one meaning, or definition; it has so, so many. Love is fluid, water, something that can conform to anything, and yet, no matter what you add to it, put it in, it remains the same. Jessie taught me what love is, and he saved me. I just wish I could've saved him-" She broke off, breaths wet with sobs, and she was shaking when I looked over at her, her head buried in her hands.

I reached over, wrapping my arm around her shoulder and rubbing it, Rayne leaning over to sob into my shoulder. She felt so small against me, tiny, burdened with something far too big for her small shoulders. I knew what she felt, back when I lost Lisa and Ben, that guilt, that grief, that choking feeling that it was your fault that they were dead. I knew, and I knew I should tell her that it wasn't her fault, that it had been a twist of fate that was meant to happen, a hole she was meant to fall into, but I didn't say anything. In many ways, I knew Rayne was stronger than me, and I had a feeling that she knew that it was unavoidable. Perhaps her youthful age granted her somewhat more emotional resiliency, or maybe it was the fact that she hasn't lost as many people as I had, or maybe she was merely just stronger than me. I didn't know. It took some time for her to calm down, but she did, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"You good?" I asked, moving my arm away.

"Yes," she looked down at her hands, chuckling weakly. "Well, there goes my makeup."

"Oh come on, like you need that."

I chuckled as I caught her rolling her eyes.

"Sure. You got some wipees?"

"In the glovebox."

She nodded, opening up the compartment, wiping her face, buildings popping up around us as we drove towards the heart of a town.

"How do you feel about stopping for a snack? I'm starving."

"You're always hungry, I swear.." She muttered, grabbing another wipe.

"Is that a yes?"

She scowled at me and I chuckled.

"Come on, one slice of pie can't hurt. Unless you're one of those weird chicks that believes even water makes you fat."

"Fine, let's go. And carbs and calories Dean, that's what girls who care about their figures are scared of."

"I think girls worry too much."
"And guys don't worry about the size of their dick?"

I scowled at her and she laughed.

"Fine. Touché. We're getting pie," I decided, pulling into the parking lot of a little café.

"But don't we sorta have a deadline?" Rayne asked as I parked the impala.

"We're making good time, and I owe you."

"For what?"

She was looking at me curiously as we got out of the car, rushing inside as sleet danced and flurried around us.

"Let's order first-" I muttered, walking up to the counter and reading the menu. "What do you want?"

"Uh, I'll just have hot chocolate and whatever pie you're having."

"Pecan it is then."

I ordered for Rayne and I, the two of us going to a booth in the corner by the window and emergency exit - to be on the safe side - blowing the steam off of our hot drinks as we sat down.

"So," Rayne said, delicately cutting her pie into little pieces. "Why do you owe me?"

"For letting me uh, do what I had to," I shrugged awkwardly, eating my pie and humming in appreciation.

"I still don't agree with what you did."

"Yeah, but you let me work my own shit out. Sam would've never have let me do that. Also, thanks for checking in with him and Jazz."

She sighed, shaking her head irascibly.

"Don't think it was out of the goodness of my heart. If you hadn't displayed such good acumen in the past months I've known you like you have, I would've blown the whistle so fast, Sam would've been there faster than The Flash."

I chuckled, raising my eyebrows at her boldness.

"Well then."

"Just keeping it real."

"Don't you always?"

She grinned, her left dimple appearing for a brief moment before she ate some of her pie.

"Well, who would've thought that my dinners would consist of pie and hot chocolate. What a life."

"Do you hate it?" I queried, curious.

She chewed another piece of pie thoughtfully, gazing out the window.

"No," she said finally, looking back down at her plate. "But it's not a life I would've chosen by any
"means."

I nodded, cutting another piece from my pie slice.

"We gonna get a motel or you just going to keep on truckin' it?"

I was about to agree with her suggestion, but then Cas' face popped into my mind, sky blue eyes dull with resigned death.

*The last look I ever saw in his eyes...*

"I'm going to keep going," I said, swallowing thickly, spearing my last slice of pie.

"Alright," Rayne nodded, finishing her own pie. "I'll get some shuteye then. We can swap drivers if you want."

I pursed my lips, not liking the idea of someone other than me behind the wheel, and she laughed.

"Come on, I have my license Dean."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"Sure," she grinned over the brim of her cup. "What is it, you believe that stereotype that girls can't drive?"

"No," I shook my head. "Women can drive just fine."

"Uh-huh."

"I mean it! Baby is just very special to me; my dad gave her to me."

"Ah I see." She nodded, brushing back her hair. "So it's sentimental value."

"Yeah."

"You get a pass for sentimentality, but my first car was a stick, so I am more than licensed to drive baby," she chuckled, getting up out of the booth. "Besides, the faster we get to the land of the sun and overpriced things, the faster we get your beloved back."

"Oh stop," I swore internally as I felt my cheeks color up, and she laughed, locking her arm with mine.

"You're so cute when you get all shy, I bet *he* agrees too."

"Rayne, shut your mouth."

"I would say make me, but that is the same as saying, 'kiss me', so I won't."

"There are other ways to make people shut up," I held open the door for her, walking outside.

"Oh *really* Dean? Did that involve some mouths straying south?" She winked, and I flushed, glad it was too dark for her to see it as we rushed to the impala.

"Jeez... I didn't say that," I muttered as I unlocked the car for her, running around to the drivers side to unlock it.

"Like I don't know what *that* implication meant," she chuckled as I closed the drivers side door,
hurriedly turning the key, the engine choking before reluctantly chugging to life.

"Cas and I never did.. that, if that's what you mean."

"Well, I'm not the one who put the idea out there."

I rolled my eyes, buckling my seat belt and turning on the heater, which was only blowing cold air still, so I turned it off.

"Fine. Disclaimer, I was teasing, and Cas and I never did that."

"You said his name."

"What?"

"Cas - you said his name. Twice." She shrugged when I gave her a quizzical look. "I've just never heard you say it out loud. It's beautiful when you say his name Dean."

"Jesus, do you think everything is cute and fluffy?" I rolled my eyes, looking over my shoulder as I backed out of the parking space, a small spark of warmth flooding my chest as I realized I had said his name.

"When it comes to you and him, yeah, I do."

"We're not that awesome."

"Bullshit. Not from what I've heard and pieced together."

"And what is that?" I asked curiously, turning onto the mostly dead street, stopping at a stoplight, the snow flurries glowing red for a split second as they fell in front of the light.

"Well, from what I know, he rescued you from hell, apocalypse, um, I think it was Cas trying to save heaven, or something. Then purgatory, then another angel war, and then God coming down? That's about all I know, but what matters, is you two fell in love in all that."

"Son of a bitch, don't fairalitize my life." I muttered.

"Fairy- what?" She burst out laughing.

"You're making my whole damn life's story sound like some fairy tale," I accelerated as I got on the freeway again, turning on the heater, the air somewhat warm.

"Maybe your life hasn't been, but your love story with Cas is."

"Oh come on," I scoffed.

"I'm being serious. I bet if he was here right now, he'd probably want to kiss you because he'd think you getting all flustered like this is cute."

"Damn it Rayne..." I muttered, hating the blush I felt on my cheeks, imagining Cas here.

*God, what would he do?*

*Maybe he would have that minutiae smile of his, barely noticeable on those plush lips. His eyes would definitely be sparkling like twin pools of water; like blue fish darting around in a fish bowl filled to the brim.*
Maybe he would be pulling himself closer to me, and his sweet, wet wood, honey sweet scent would envelop my senses. Maybe, he would be kissing my neck as I drive, whispering something in Enochian, maybe.
And god, how happy I would be to pull the damn car over and fucking ravish those plush lips, kiss him until he was moaning my name and demanding me for more-

"Dean? Earth to Dean," Rayne sang, and I blinked, yanked back to the present.

Cas...

"Y-yeah, I'm here," I stammered, clearing my throat.

"Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere."

"Bullshit."

"Oh piss off Rayne.." I muttered in annoyance, wishing I could've stayed in my dream world longer, shifting in my seat.

"Did I interrupt something..?" She said softly, repentantly.

"No," I sighed, rubbing my face. "You should get in the backseat and crash if you plan on switching drivers later."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Wake me up if anything."

"There's a blanket back there if you want it."

She nodded, carefully climbing over the seat and settling in the back, and I turned up the radio slightly, Aerosmith still playing.

What can I do? I'm sleepin' on this bed alone.

Baby, you're my angel

Come and save me tonight

You're my angel

Come and make it alright

The next couple of hours were grueling, but I pushed through the weariness that wanted to overtake me, each time thinking of Cas, and how close I was getting to finding him after a year.

A whole damn year later.
The doubts started to trickle in, the inky black fears.

Would he be mad that I couldn't find him sooner? Would he still.. want me? What if I was too late?

I tried banishing the thoughts and burying them, but the closer to California I got, the worse they became.

I reluctantly agreed to swap drivers with Rayne at daybreak, my eyelids growing heavy. But as exhausted as I was, my thoughts wouldn't let me sleep, and the new space I had inside my head since I wasn't focused on driving increased, and my thoughts spiraled into darker and darker scenarios. I eventually fell into a half awake, half asleep doze, tossing and turning with the terrifying images my mind conjured, everything feeling so horrifyingly real. I woke up to Rayne shaking me awake, having pulled over into some restaurant for brunch. Eating was a quiet event, and I was grateful Rayne didn't try to placate me with those crappy, 'he'll be just fine' pep talks. A part of me wanted to hear that assurance, but another didn't; didn't want to tempt fate, rewrite destiny. I didn't ask myself what I would do if worst came to worst, because I couldn't stand the terror that would rip through my stomach at the very thought, tearing the breath out of me. If I couldn't stand the mere thought, god knew how I would stand the possible reality.

I was grateful to get back behind the wheel after brunch, Rayne crashing in the back again. I went through quite a few of my cassette tapes, the land undulating and slowly morphing into different territories; desert, rocks, forest, mountains, sprawling valleys. It was like slowly making my way through a film, watching the land morph and transform into different environments before my very eyes. The steady white lane markers, touristy signs, towns, and eighteen wheelers I passed became a rhythm, and it was an easy thing to lose myself in, my music a soft companion in the foreground. We passed the California state line early afternoon, and the doubts and worries I had managed to somewhat escape earlier in the comfort of driving, slowly began creeping back. Suppose Nira wasn't there? Maybe she somehow got the jump on us coming and left, scattered in the winds again. Or what if she was lying in wait?

What if I would never see Cas again?

It was getting dark by the time we got to fisherman's wharf and to our final destination, and I couldn't stop the tremble in my fingers as I loaded my shotgun with live rounds parked outside the abandoned fishing factory Lester had mentioned.

"Dean," Rayne put her hand on my arm, startling me into dropping the round. "Breathe."

"I am," I muttered, picking up the round and stuffing it into the barrel.

"Humor me. Deep breaths."

"Rayne, I don't have time for damn yoga." I snapped, cocking the gun.

She sighed softly, but said nothing more, loading up her own shotgun as I checked and prepared my pistol, loading it with witch killing bullets.

"Ready." I asked after I had my assortments of blades and guns in place, shutting the trunk.
"I am if you are, and Dean," Rayne put her hand on my shoulder, turning me to her. "Don't let your emotions have control."

"I know," I muttered, putting my pistol in the waistband of my pants before picking up my shotgun. "Let's go."

It was eerie stalking towards the rustic building in the fresh darkness, the sun having bedded for the night. Our feet crunched lightly over the gravel, and I slowly turned the knob to a rusting metal door once we approached it, the aged metal opening with a soft creak.

"This feels like a trap..." Rayne whispered leerily, peering around me inside the black abyss of the building.

"Only one way to find out." I clicked on my flashlight, nodding for her to follow me, Rayne clicking on her own flashlight as I creeped inside.

There were ceiling high rows of rusting racks, old boxes, barrels, papers, and various smaller miscellaneous objects littering both the floor and the shelves, bright scribbles of graffiti here and there. Rayne squeaked as a rat darted across our path, but aside from the bulbous rat, there was no other signs of life.

Room after room we searched, the place seemingly endless, and we reached the last room, but to no avail.

"Son of a bitch..." I swore, tangling my fingers so tightly in my hair, I could feel my skin lifting from the effort.

"Calm down, maybe we missed something..." Rayne offered, and I could hear things being shuffled around as she looked around.

"Don't bother. I've been lied to-"

"There's a basement."

"A wh-" I broke off, looking up and following her pointing finger, pointing at a map that Rayne hung on the wall.

"It looks like the entrance to it is in the other room, with that locked door." She sighed, looking over at me with a shrug. "Feel like bashing some doors in?"

"Always."

She nodded, inspecting the map one last time before waving for me to follow her, leading me out of the office and down the hallway. We eventually found the room again, gazing at the door after we double checked that it was locked.

"Well, I guess have at it." She shrugged, stepping back and aiming her gun towards the door.

"Cover your eyes," I commanded, steeling myself before charging the door, jamming my foot as hard as I could against it.

The old wood creaked in protest, but didn't give. I kicked it hard again, but with little more success. It took quite a few more kicks before the door finally gave, slamming hard against the wall, revealing a stairwell, the snapping wood reverberating...
down into the mouth of the basement.

"So much for the element of surprise..." I muttered, taking a breath and started heading down.

It was darker down in the basement, and I could instantly feel the darkness wanting to wrap itself around me, the feeble combined light of me and Rayne's flashlights the only thing combating it.

That is, until they both sputtered and died at the same time.

"Son of a bitch..." I swore, hitting my flashlight in a vain effort to make it work. "These were brand new batteries..."

"Perhaps you should invest in a better brand."

A swoosh, like a match being lit, then light, a lone candle serving as our sun in the darkness.

"You." I hissed as Nira was illuminated in the faint light.

"Hiya Dean," she smiled bashfully. "Oh, you brought a new friend! How wonderful!"

"Game over Nira, you've got nowhere to run."

"Is it really?" She smiled innocently, but the barely concealed maliciousness sent chills up my spine.

She shifted her grip on the candle, illuminating the edge of a red sigil painted into the ground.

"What did you do?" I hissed, pointing to the sigil.

"What, that?" She raised her candle higher, revealing a circle of candles, and silver bowl sitting in the center of a blackish-red sigil, something I'd never seen before.

"You want your dear Cas back, don't you? I mean, that's why you're here, right?" She frowned like a petulant child, pouting her Cupid's bow pink lips.

His name sent a thrill through me, my palms clammy with sweat as I shifted my grip on my shotgun.

"Bring him back, now!" I hissed, taking a step closer to her, the barrel of my shotgun aimed in her face, directly between her eyes.

"Now, now, Dean, you know it isn't nice to treat a lady like that," she raised her hands in surrender, taking a small step back.

"You're no lady, you're nothing but a soulless bitch."

"Ouch, you're hurting my feelings."

She sniffed, mockingly pretending to cry, still stepping back slowly, and I matched her every step back with a step forward.

"I don't give a fucking damn about your feelings, bring him back, or god so help me..."

"What?" She taunted, smirking as she pressed herself up against a wall. "Tell me, make me shake in my boots, Dean."

"I'll be sure that you know what it feels like to have your skin being slowly peeled off while still breathing."
"Ooh, I'm terrified," she feigned a shudder, her hands sliding down along the walls slowly.

"Your little messenger boy was."

"So that's what happened to him. Was wondering where he'd gone off to. Oh well," she shrugged indifferently, and I snarled in disgust.

"You make me sick.." I hissed.

She grinned, winking.

"There was a time when I made you sick with pleasure," she giggled, like I was silly for forgetting. "Good thing I have two messenger boys."

She shouted latin, tossing something into the bowl with a yell, and all hell broke loose.

Loud, howling screams of wind spit dust and dirt in my eyes, papers and cans rattling and clashing all over the room while Nira cackled like she'd lost her mind.

The wind was so strong, it was taking all I could to hold my ground, and forget about seeing, because the bright light illuminating through the sigil Nira had made was burning my eyes from the intensity, not to mention the dust and dirt assaulting my eyes.

The wind and strange, unearthly screaming howled louder and louder and louder, and I found myself collapsing to my knees, eyes screwed shut and hands clasped over my ears. The light had become so bright, it was even hurting my closed eyes, burning and searing into me like white hot butter knives all over my body.

Suddenly, I could faintly hear Nira screaming something at the top of her lungs above the din, the insane intensity boiling so high, I thought I was going to die.

Cas... I love you...

Silence.

The howling, unearthly screams and howls of wind were gone and it was deathly silent aside from heavy breaths, and the light was gone.

I hesitated, before I opened one eye, Nira's lone candle still burning somehow, Nira's body limp in the center of the sigil, bowl in her hand.

"Rayne?" I gasped, turning my head to look at her, but she was frozen, staring at something beyond me.

My blood ran cold at her intrepid stare, and I slowly turned my head to follow her line of sight.

My blood drained from my face as I saw a figure huddled against the wall, rocking slightly, dark hair wild and tangled, curling around the collar of a torn and bloodied blue sweater.

Cas...

Oh god it was Cas... he was here.

"Cas..." I choked, hardly noticing my shotgun clattering to the floor as I scrambled to my feet, dashing across the room, closing the final bit of space between us.

"Cas... oh god Cas..." I gasped, not even caring that my knees were screaming in protest to me sliding on my knees over to him, wrapping my arms around him in a death grip, squeezing him tight
God, he seemed smaller than I remembered, and so much different, and he didn't even smell the same; like death and some other acrid scents I didn't have a name for in the moment, pulling and tugging him closer to me.

"Cas... Cas... Cas..." I muttered his name like a mantra, my voice cracking and breaking, but I didn't give a damn.

I needed to feel those plush lips on mine again, I desperately need to feel his arms wrap around me vice like, squeezing the very breath from me, to hear him say my name.

I couldn't breathe, and I finally turned him towards me, tangling my hand in his hair, my other arm wrapped so tightly around his waist it hurt, but he was there, I could feel him, I could touch him, and I could kiss him. Kiss him finally after these long months, this long year without his breath, without his smile, without his voice.

"You're alive..." I laughed weakly, brushing back his unruly, dirty hair, letting my hand trail over his peach fuzz he'd grown. "God... you're alive."

I was so close to him, I could feel his breath on my lips, my fingers digging into his skin, wishing and begging for a response from him. A sigh, a laugh, a kiss... Anything.

He raised his eyes up to meet mine, and I was not prepared for the utter terror that made the whites of his eyes almost glow in the dim light, and he was shoving at me, clawing and pushing away from me. gasping and shaking in fear, his body scraping across the floor as he shoved himself away from me.

"C-Cas..?" I whispered, my chest hollow in confusion and terror, and I vaguely noticed that my cheeks were wet.

He said nothing, gasping as he pushed himself as far away from me as possible, his face paling further as the wall prevented him from going any farther away from me.

"Cas... it's me..." I whispered, a new coldness trickling into my veins at his terrified expression.

He visibly swallowed thickly, his eyes still as wide as saucers and his knees were pulled against his chest as he still tried to get farther away from me as he said:

"I don't know you."
"W-what do you mean you don't remember me..?" I gasped, swallowing thickly, frozen in place. "Cas, it's me."

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Cas demanded, shooting leery glances between Nira's still form, then at Rayne and I.

"B-because, it's your name, or part of it..." I said softly, my breath caught in my chest, my heart hammering almost as hard as it had that one time when I got that damned fear disease from that ghost years ago.

He frowned, scrutinizing me slightly, still trembling from fright, but the whites of his eyes weren't as prominent as they had been earlier, as it eased a fraction of my anxiety.

"How do you know that?" He challenged, his shoulders in hard lines, and if he were an animal, his hair would've been standing straight on end.

"Cas.." I tried to swallow, but failed as my mouth was so dry. "Don't you remember..?"

His eyes roved over me, but there wasn't one fragment of recognition, warmth, or adoration in his eyes.
It was dull. Empty. Critical, like he was appraising livestock at a fair, rather than gazing at the face he once loved.

He wasn't Cas; he wasn't my Cas.

Then something he'd said, my Cas said, that fateful year ago before everything had fallen apart, seeped into my mind like poison.

"I began to suspect it when you started loosing your memories; it is aptly named, because in The Empty, you lose yourself. You loose your memories first, then your acumen, then your identity, till you have nothing but your base instincts."

Oh god.

He'd lost his mind...

Cas was still trembling in the corner, a frightened animal ready to bolt at any second, but I could see that familiar tenseness in his muscles, the fight he was willing to put up should he have to.
It suddenly hit me that I couldn't tell him that I was his everything. I couldn't tell him that I'd missed him, or that I.. loved him. That'd be too much. I'd have to handle this lightly, take baby steps.
Cas had won me over when he first met me after some patient show of proof, I would just have to do the same thing here and tread lightly.
I could do that, couldn't I?

Focus Dean, pretend this is just any normal, run of the mill hunt. What would we do first?

I took a breath, looking over at Rayne, who was sprawled on the floor, frozen in place as she gawked at Cas like she was seeing some new undiscovered creature in the rainforest.
"Rayne," I said softly, trying not to let my panic or hysteria seep into my voice. "Are you okay?"

She blinked, as if being pulled out of a trance, slowly looking over at me before nodding mutely.

"Where is Nira?"

"U-um..." Rayne cleared her throat, looking behind her, and I followed her gaze to see Nira lying still in the center of the sigil.

"Is she alive?" I queried, and Rayne slowly dragged her way over to Nira's limp body, hesitantly picking up her wrist and feeling for a pulse.

"She's dead.." Rayne marveled, touching Nira's neck to double check for a pulse.

"Are you serious?" I exclaimed in disbelief.

"Why would she kill herself to bring Cas back? That makes no sense." Rayne mused, sitting back on her haunches.

"I guess we should burn the body-" I trailed off as I noticed Cas edging towards the door. "Cas, stay."

He froze instantly, whirling around and looking at the floor in obvious quandary.

"I-I can't.." he whispered softly, not meeting my gaze.

A part of me wanted to grab him, cradle him to my chest and keep him from going anywhere, but I knew that would just make things worse.

"Where else will you go?" I questioned softly.

He said nothing, just shuffled his feet a bit, contemplating his options.

"Trust me Cas, you're safe with me."

"How do I know that?" He exclaimed, looking up at me sharply with suspicious eyes. "Why should I trust you?"

As rightful his questions were, each word sliced me open with fresh wounds, bringing further cognizance to the situation.

"I'll uh, take care of this.." Rayne muttered, dragging Nira's limp body away.

"Let me help you," I said, Cas moving away instantly as Rayne neared him by the basement stairwell.

"No, I-I got it," she shook her head, struggling to pick up Nira.

"Rayne, leave it-her. Why don't you just get the uh, fire prepared..?"

She nodded reluctantly, looking between Cas and I before she ascended the stairs, the old wood creaking and groaning with her every step. Once she was gone, I carefully stood up, a wary Cas watching my every move with the trust of a rabbit in front of a snake on the hunt.

"Cas..." I took a breath, unable to look him in the eye although I could feel his distrustful gaze on me. "Do you uh, remember what a picture is?"
He didn't respond for a second, before slowly shaking his head, still pressing his back against the wall, obviously ready to bolt up the stairs if I made one wrong move.

"It's something that camera's take so that way you can remember a moment forever." I held my free hand up in surrender, slowly and carefully pulling our photo booth photos out of my jacket pocket with my right hand. I then cautiously held the photos out to Cas, his leery eyes darting back and forth from my hand, to my eyes.

"Here, take a look." I encouraged, nodding pointedly to my hand.

His gaze flickered down to the pictures, and I stayed completely still, feeling like I was trying to feed a wild deer.

He finally slowly reached out, snatching the photos away in one quick motion, giving me a distrustful glance before looking down at the photos, a crease between his brows instantly forming as he examined the film.

"Is that me..?" He asked in dumb, confused awe, his brows still furrowed.

"Yes," I affirmed softly, letting my hand slowly fall to my side.

"And..." the furrow in his brow deepened, and he tilted his head, and I felt a small dash of warmth through my chest.

Hope.

"That's... that's you," he realized, looking up at me, then back at the photo, then back at me, as if he wasn't trusting his eyes. "Why did we take these?"

"Because you wanted to know what a photo booth was." I chuckled quietly, remembering that day.

"What's that?"

"It takes your photos, just like the ones you're holding. I can take you to that same booth sometime, if you want."

He nodded, gazing deeply at the photos again, and I was relieved to see that the tightness in his muscles had relaxed some, and the wild animal look in his eyes had lessened.

"Dean, right?" He asked softly, looking up at me with that piercing, calculative gaze of his.

I nodded, swallowing thickly.

"Thank you for sharing these with me, Dean." He held the photos out for me to take back, and I shook my head.

"You keep them, they're yours, really."

He frowned, tilting his head.

"Then why did you have them, Dean?"

"Someone had to keep them safe for you.." I shrugged awkwardly, rubbing the back of my neck.

He furrowed his brow at me, scrutinizing me and I couldn't help but flush.
"What?"

He shook his head, and I nodded, looking over at Nira's limp body, sighing.

"Cas, would you be okay to come with me? I'm sure Rayne is waiting for us."

He noticeably swallowed nervously, but nodded, still holding the pictures tightly in his fingers, the film roll curling a bit under the pressure.

"Okay," I took a breath, carefully stepping closer to Nira, Cas instantly tensing at the motion. "I'm going to pick her up and carry her up the stairs, alright?"

He nodded again, backing away from me as I carefully made my way over to Nira's body. I could feel his eyes on me as I checked her pulse one last time - to still find nothing - before hauling her up in my arms with a grunt, nodding for Cas to follow me as I ascended the stairs.

I got about halfway up the flight of stairs before I heard a step creak from him following behind me, and it comforted me slightly.

"Dean?" Cas said as I reached the foot of the stairs.

"Yeah?" I grunted, shifting my grip on Nira's heavy body.

"Who is Rayne? Did I know her.. before?" He said the last word tentatively, as if he wasn't sure it was appropriate to use.

"No," I cleared my throat. "She's someone I've met within the last couple months."

He was quiet while we passed through the next few rooms and hallways, and he walked with a much quieter gait than before; I could barely even hear him. There were even a few times I was certain he had taken off, but he was always there when I looked over my shoulder to check.

"H-how long was I gone..?" He asked softly as we entered the last big storage room with the rusting, graffiti covered racks.

"A little over a year."

"Are you certain?"

"Very." I grunted as I opened the door to the outside, my arms starting to hurt from exertion.

I stepped outside, glancing over at him as Cas peered out the door, hanging back as he looked around.

"Cas, you can come out. I won't let anything hurt you."

As long as I have breath in me...

He looked back over at me, nodding slightly, but still made no move to follow me, so I just walked towards the back of the building, following the smell of smoke. I was more than relieved to round the corner and find Rayne there, the fire prepped and ready.

"How is he?" She whispered as I laid Nira in the fire, grabbing the extra shovel Rayne had grabbed, helping her dig the hole she was working on.

"Bad.." I whispered, spearing my shovel into the dirt.
A half hour later, Rayne and I buried Nira's burned body, eager to get out before we were discovered or drew any attention.

Cas stayed, but kept his distance, and when he wasn't glancing around in fear - which was what he did most of that time - he was gazing down at the photos of him and I, his expression unreadable. It was hard to focus, keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn't bolt, and to hurry up and finish the task at hand.

Once we did, I had to explain to Cas what a car was, and once he got inside the back, I explained to him in detail where we were heading next - home.

Of course, he didn't remember it, or anything at all it seemed. I was having trouble focusing on driving and answering Cas' many questions, such as his full name, where we were, what an 'In-N-Out' was, just anything.

His questions shouldn't have bothered me as much as they had, but they did, and mercifully, Rayne seemed to pick up on my woe, taking over in answering all his questions.

It hurt me that Cas was like a creature thrown on an alien world, knowing nothing and no one anymore.

It hurt me, because I should've tried harder to get him to come with me. I should've held tighter onto his hands, or let myself die to get him back home. I should've done something more.

Now, he looked at me like I was some stranger, a person he was passing on the sidewalk.

I tried not to remember how once I had been something that was his universe. And now, I was merely a falling star, something not worth being noted.

And it hurt.

Once Cas tired of asking questions, I called Sam, filling him in with as many details as I could without saying something that would set Cas off in any way. Sam seemed to understand, and merely said him and Jazz would be ready for us at home.

I wasn't looking forward to the four to five day drive.

I hung up, having to explain to Cas who Sam was, and he asked more questions about me, but never broached any topics concerning him and I.

I wasn't sure if I should be relieved with Rayne present, or even more terrified than I already was. Because what if in a way, I had lost Cas?

Lost the one creature who understood me better than anyone, the one who raised me from perdition, who helped keep my head straight.

Who made me happy.

I couldn't bring myself to stop driving, my thoughts too full, emotions too distraught and high. I played The Yardbirds, Led Zeppelin, and Aerosmith, the three bands Cas had liked during our road trip a year ago, hoping to elicit a response from him, maybe trigger a memory.

Nothing.

He was quiet, and it worried me further how silent he was, Rayne having fallen asleep in the passenger side long ago, Cas just staring out the window at the stars.

I wanted to speak to him, but I didn't know what to say, or how to say what I wanted to without scaring him, so I just didn't say anything.

Cas didn't say anything either, but I was relieved that most of the tension and terror stricken fear in his eyes was gone, but he still let no one near him, and he always looked like he was on the cusp of ditching each and every time I stopped at a gas station to gas up the impala and use a restroom.

The fifth rest stop, he asked me if he could use my phone, in which I shrugged and agreed, letting
him use it. It was slightly amusing hearing him in the back trying to figure it out, but he must've figured it out soon after, because he was silent after that. I was swapping driving with Rayne at dawn, ready to crash in the passenger seat from weariness and over mental stimulation, when Cas hesitantly gave me my phone back, battery completely drained. Our fingers touched as I took my phone back, and I tried not to think too much of him wrenching his hand away the second our skin touched like my hand was on fire. I put my phone on the charger and went to sleep, though it was a fitful sleep and not comfortable at all.

I awoke to us being halfway through Arizona, Rayne still going strong, and the sun in the middle of the sky. What I didn't expect though, was Cas to be dead asleep against the door, breaths labored and heavy with obvious nightmares. I turned awake to wake him, but Rayne stopped me with a silent shake of her head. "He just fell asleep about ten minutes ago," she whispered when I let my eyes ask her why not. "So unless angels take potty breaks, drink water and sleep, I think we got a problem here."

I swore, rubbing my face with my hands as I faced back forward, sighing heavily. "I'm guessing that's bad...?" Rayne said softly, her face crestfallen. "Very."

It was midnight by the time we stopped at a motel for the night in New Mexico, the air frigid as the two of us coaxed a shivering Cas inside. Rayne showered first, then me, and I guess she must've taught Cas the basics of showering, because she sent him off to the bathroom after me, a pile of my clothes in hand. "I figured you didn't mind him wearing your things.." Rayne whispered with a slight smile, one I didn't return. "As long at he's okay."

I paused, noticing the dilemma of only two beds after I put away my clothes from the day. "I guess you and I will have to share a bed, because I doubt Cas will want to even be within touching distance of me," I sighed, unable to hide the bitterness in my voice. "Dean, he'll come around. You did, didn't you?" Rayne said softly, putting her hand on my shoulder, rubbing it soothingly. "Yeah. After weeks of fever, delirium, and dementia. And even then, all I could think about was Cas. I could feel him even when I didn't consciously remember him. I could-" I broke off, turning away. "Could what Dean?" Rayne prodded, blue-gray eyes a blend of sympathetic curiosity. "Nothing," I muttered, shaking my head. "It doesn't even matter since he can't stand being in the same room as me-" I shut up as I heard a soft breath behind me, Rayne and I both turning to see Cas, dressed in my sweatpants, and green t-shirt. He was also freshly shaved, dark spots around the collar of my shirt from where water had dripped off of his long hair.
I turned away, getting in the bed that was closest to the door, lying down facing the ugly curtains that covered the window, faintly hearing Rayne telling Cas that he needed to dry his hair. I was half asleep when I felt a depression in the bed beside me, and in my hazy consciousness, I found a part of me coming alive with joy, because _Cas was here._

Cas would know how to make me feel better, how to kiss my worries away. I rolled over to see him, only to see Rayne's back, and the painful reality sent me falling again. Who was I kidding, it was just like Cas had never come back, because he didn't.

My Cas was dead, killed in his sacrifice for me to live. I didn't know this hollow shell that had been shoved back at me, didn't care to know it. Sure, this Cas talked the same, walked mostly the same, looked the same - aside from the Thor hair - had some of the same emotional quirks, but he wasn't Cas. _My Cas would be with me right now, wrapping himself so tightly around me, I wouldn't know my body from his._

Maybe he'd even be kissing me, pulling my body higher and higher into that heavenly pleasure he gave me, his every touch as gentle and as warm as his gaze, blue eyes fire in the dark. My Cas would whisper Enochian to me, telling me sweet things I didn't need to understand to know that he was worshipping me.

_My Cas would tell me he loved me._

I didn't have much to say the next morning, or at breakfast, or for the drive, though we finally made it to Texas early afternoon.

I didn't want to think about that shell Cas liked hash browns and eggs and ultra sweet coffee like my Cas did, or liked to look at tiny trinkets at gas stations like my Cas.

I didn't care how much of a good listener he was to Rayne, or how much like he was in subtle ways like my Cas.

My Cas was dead, and this Cas was nothing but a painful reminder of that.

A part of me wondered if I should've just died in The Empty. Then, I would've been with Cas forever.

_My Cas._

"Okay, I'm done with this, 'woe is me', bullshit," Rayne snapped two days later while Cas was in the shower at the motel we stopped at for the night.

"What are you talking about?" I muttered as I folded up my clothes from earlier that day, stuffing them in my duffel bag.

"You damn well know. You're treating Cas like he's a stranger."

"He is," I snapped, whirling around to glare at her. "My Cas is dead."

"Do you think 'your' Cas would've left you to fend for yourself like this just because you'd lost your way?!"

I shut up, looking down at my duffel bag, fiddling with a loose string on one of its handles with my finger.

"No." I whispered finally.

"That's what I thought. So get your shit together, and man up. Be the man your Cas loved, and maybe he'll come back to you."
She stalked off to get into bed, Cas stepping out of the bathroom a few seconds later, looking over at me after sweeping the room with a wary gaze like he always did now.

"Hey.." I said awkwardly, scratching the back of my neck. "How was the shower?"

"It was satisfying," he rubbed his wet hair with a towel. "How was yours, Dean?"

"It wasn't bad," I shrugged, at a loss for what else to say.

Cas stared tepidly at me, saying nothing more as he hung up his towel, getting into his own bed, turning off the lamp on his side.

My chest ached, and I was again struck with the fact that things weren't the same between Cas and I, and I wasn't sure if they ever would be again.

I crawled in bed with Rayne after turning off the light, facing Cas, though he was lying supine on his back like he usually was, stiff and tense, never once fully relaxing, and he woke at the slightest of sound. His eyes would warily follow your every move if you got up early that morning or for a midnight pee break.

I had figured his tenseness would fade away once he got comfortable with us, but it didn't, if anything, remaining almost the exact same as the day Nira spit him out of The Empty.

I sighed, closing my eyes to sleep.

I awoke later to screams, Rayne and I jolting awake to see Cas jerking and writhing in bed like he was possessed.

"Cas?" I called out to him, Rayne turning on the lamp as I dashed across the mere couple feet separating us, gently shaking his shoulders. "Cas, it's a dream angel, it's just a dream."

He snapped awake, gasping, the wild animal look in his eyes again, terror stricken eyes meeting mine as his clammy hands gripped my forearms so tightly, he cut off my circulation, but I wanted to banish that wild animal look in his eyes.

I wanted that strong, fierce, yet gentle and piercing gaze that Cas used to have back, not this terrified creature that jumped at every breath and shadow and shook in terror like an abused animal.

"It's okay," I found myself whispering, unable to stand his terror, gently brushing his sweat sodden hair back with my hand, Cas' eyes locked on me, body stiff and frozen like he was carved of ice.

"I'm right here.."

I let my hand fall to cup his face, wanting to hug him to my chest, warm him until all that terror, all that fear was banished. I wanted to cry against him, sob for the time together we'd lost, for the pain we'd both endured. I wanted to hold him tight enough that I pieced him back together, even if it meant loosing myself.

Then suddenly Cas was pulling away, curling up to the other side of the bed, as far away from me as he could get, pulling the blankets tightly around him.

I exhaled, failing at trying not to feel that crushing, overwhelming slap of reality, that Cas no longer knew me, and that he would maybe never be the same, never want me the way he used to.

I got up, turning around and laying back in bed next to Rayne, ignoring her gaze on me, and I was grateful that she didn't say anything, just rolling over and turning off the lamp, plunging us into semi darkness again since we left the bathroom light on. We always left one light one because the first time we tried sleeping in the dark two days ago, Cas had completely freaked out and broke down in a panic attack, only appeased by a light being on at all times during the night.
Cas never said what he was so terrified of, or what he had experienced, and I never found the right moment to ask him, or much less felt he trusted me enough to even tell me had I asked anyways. All Rayne and I could really do was look out for him, and try to calm him when he had panic attacks, which seemed triggered by one factor: darkness.

I privately called Sam earlier that night, giving him an update on everything and asking him to buy night lights to fill the entire bunker with, since the bunker had no windows to let light in. I also asked him to do research, to find anything he could about The Empty, or PTSD ex-angels. I hoped Sam would have something to help shed light on Cas' situation by the time we made it to the bunker tomorrow night, though I had a feeling he wouldn't be able to find anything.

The next day was a quiet event, Cas blatantly avoiding me, only speaking unless spoken to, and only to Rayne. I didn't understand why, a part of me hoping that last's night moment would've triggered something in him, given him more trust in me, but he was even more distant than before, and I couldn't stand the gaping hole that ached in my chest as a result.

We were about an hour from home later that evening, Sam calling us to ask us to stop for supplies. Rayne volunteered to go, since she, 'would be quick and wanted to stretch out her legs', leaving Cas and I in the impala alone.

I tried making small talk with him, asking how he was doing, but he said nothing, just curled in on himself in the backseat, staring out the window at the pastel sunset, his eyes getting that wild animal look again like it always did when it started getting dark. Despite knowing the fact that I had to be patient with him, I was getting angry with him, wanting to just shake him by the shoulders, tell him to snap out of it and come back to me, that I was only trying to help him.

But I held my tongue and my temper, giving up on trying to talk to him, turning back around and sitting in tense silence, Rayne coming back several minutes later. After her and I put the supplies in the trunk, we were off again, the night pitch black without the moon. It was an easy final stretch before we made it home - Rayne explaining to Cas who Sam and Jazz were - and I parked the impala in the garage.

The three of us filed out, Rayne and I opening the trunk to get the supplies and our duffel bags out, Cas slamming himself against the side of the impala as Hotep ran up to him, meowing in frenzied excitement.

"W-what's that..?" Cas demanded, his voice shaking in terror as he ran away from the cat, Hotep mewing in protest.

"That's your cat, Hotep. You found him as a kitten and took him in," I explained, rubbing the purring tabby cat's head. "He's excited to see you after a year, that's all."

I stood back up straight, carrying the supplies to the kitchen behind Rayne, Jazz and Sam greeting us warmly before coming to help us unload the rest of the things. I couldn't help but grow angrier as we came back in the garage, seeing Cas now holding Hotep, tepidly petting that cat, his expression the warmest I'd seen it since I lost him. He was of course, wary with meeting Sam and Jezebel, but still warmer to them than he was with me.

"Dean," Sam said as we came back to the garage to get the next pile of bags. "Why don't you show Cas his room? You know, show him around."

I sighed, pulling my duffel bag over my shoulder, and I could feel Sam's eyes on me as I made my way over to Cas. He was standing off to the side and warmly petting Hotep, and if I had let myself believe it, I would've thought nothing had changed, and that my Cas was here, happy to see his cat.
But no, the sharp reality was stabbed into me yet again at the sharp, distrusting look he shot me once he noticed me walking up, tensing before me.

"Why don't I uh, show you around," I muttered, shifting my grip on my bag.

He stared leerily at me for a few moments, looking at Rayne, Jazz, and Sam behind me taking the groceries inside, before finally nodding, though not meeting my eyes. He was silent, following me deeper into the bunker as I showed him where the kitchen was, then the makeshift living room, which he appraised listlessly, and I couldn't help but remember the look in his eyes when we'd first kissed in that very room.

I showed him the study, library, the bathroom, the extra rooms, then lastly, I pointed out everyone's respective bedrooms, coming to Cas' last.

"So, this is your room," I opened the door to his room, flicking on the lamp, letting him walk in.

He appraised it silently, still holding Hotep in his arms, the cat purring loudly.

"And I'm next door if you need me," I stuffed my hands in my jean pockets, still restraining my temper.

He said nothing, just petted the cat and ignored me.

"You know, there are other people around here with feelings too." I snapped, unable to take his crass behavior any longer.

His gaze snapped straight over to me, eyes widening in fear, but I couldn't find it in myself to care.

"There are people around here who love you, who just want to fucking help you, but it's kinda hard when you're just being a damn recluse like batman."

His brow quirked in confusion, head tilting slightly, but he said nothing.

"I want to help you," I hissed. "I spent a whole damn year looking for you as soon as I could walk and remember you. You wouldn't believe the lengths I took to even get here," I laughed sardonically, rubbing the bridge of my nose. "The old you would've handed me my ass if he knew."

I took a breath, staring at the brown floor, the edge of Cas' white rug appearing at the top of my visual range.

"You can't get better if you just hide in a corner and bite your fucking fingernails; you gotta face this, and I'm here to help. I'm trying to help you," I thought I heard a soft gasp, but I ignored it, rolling on. "I don't know what you want or need; it's kinda hard to know when you won't even fucking talk to me, much less look me in the goddamn eye."

I looked up at him and he averted his gaze, and I scoffed, rolling my eyes.

"My point exactly. You know where everything is if you need something."

I turned around, stalking out of his room and slamming the door behind me, Sam jumping in response.

"Dude, what the hell are you doing?" He hissed, looking over at Cas' door like it was a ticking time bomb.

"Oh fuck off Sam," I scowled, waving him off as I opened my bedroom door, Sam making a move
towards Cas' door. "Don't even bother, he'll just sit in a corner and stare at you like you fucking said you wanted to marry the devil."

"Dean-"

I slammed the door behind me, not wanting to hear his angst ridden excuses.

I didn't care anymore, nor did I want to hear it.

I was done bleeding myself dry for something that wasn't at least trying to meet me halfway, something that wouldn't even look at me with a hint of interest.

I grabbed my iPod, putting in my earbuds and blaring some random music, crossing my arms and lying on my bed, glaring up at the ceiling as I seethed in frustration.

What the hell did Rayne know, saying that my Cas would come back to me in time.

Cas was gone, and he was never coming back.
Six

Cas avoided me all the next day, and I was glad to be rid of him, not wanting to see his fear riddled, distrustful eyes.
So I ignored him in turn, not offering him my company or anything.
Rayne, Sam and Jazz all tried talking to me one by one throughout the day, but I shut them out, eventually locking my door because I was fed up with them trying to coax me out and getting me to apologize to Cas.
I didn't come out for lunch or dinner, just laid in my bed watching movies and listening to music until I fell asleep.
The next day was much the same, and I avoided everyone, taking a pie, bag of chips and coffee from the kitchen before I holed up in my room to binge watch some anime, mostly this skating one I kept seeing all over my social medias. I eventually got bored of watching TV, so I tried watching some youtube, but that was boring as well, so I switched over to music.
I wasn't laying there long before I was starving, my pie and chips long gone.
I got up and dressed, shooting Sam a quick text as I passed Cas' closed bedroom door that I'd be gone before walking into the garage and getting in the impala and driving off, the sun setting in the distance.
I drove past the coffee shop Cas and I once ate at ages ago with Mr. Overshare as our cashier, a pang flushing through me at the memories. I also tried ignoring the memories the mall threatened to rise within me as I drove past it, but to no real avail.
I started thinking of Cas' bright smile, his laugh that sounded like sunshine personified. I thought of what he felt like. His gentle touch, as gentle as an archeologist pulling an ancient artifact out of the earth. Or his blue oynx eyes, like twin fish bowls, his emotions swimming in his eyes like twin Powder Blue Tangs; gazing upon me such thick ardor and devotion, it never failed to send a tingle of warmth from the top of my head, to my toes. I couldn't help but think of his assiduous nature to do any and everything he could for me, not once caring that he was giving up the only home he'd ever known, his family, his very beliefs, army, and self, not so as long as I was breathing.

A belligerent crash of hysteria and shame forced me to pull into a damn parking lot, my body shacking as I rested my head on the steering wheel, crossing my arms over my head.
Cas had willingly lost so much for me, and yet, what had I ever done for him? Nothing really on the same magnitude, and the one time he really needed me, I was running, leaving him to fend for himself in a world he no longer knew.

Who was the crass one now...

Taking a deep breath, I sat up, turning the key and starting the car again and backing out, knowing exactly how I should start making amends.

Forty minutes later, I shifted the bag of food on my arm, licking my bottom lip nervously as I stood
outside Cas' door, taking a breath before I hesitantly knocked on the door. There was no answer, and I felt my face growing hot in chagrin, debating on just forgetting the idea and running to my room when the knob slowly turned, the side of Cas' head appearing in the crack of the door.

"Hey Cas," I cleared my throat, lifting up the bag. "I uh, got you some food. Italian, because you uh, like Italian."

I rubbed the back of my neck sheepishly, Cas saying nothing.

"Also, I uh, wanted to apologize, for the other day. I shouldn't have yelled at you, I should uh, have more empathy for what you're going through." I bit my bottom lip nervously as I looked down at the floor, the edge of Cas' socked feet in my peripheral vision. "So for that, I'm sorry."

"And you believe my previous predilection for a food type will ease your penitence?" He asked, and I balked, trying to figure out how to respond to that.

"Uh... Kinda..?" I shrugged sheepishly, and I reached out to hold the door open when he went to close it. "Please, at least eat."

"With you?" He said brusquely, and I swallowed thickly at his insinuation.

"If you want..."

He still seemed set on closing the door, but he didn't, opening it slowly after a long beat of silence, stepping aside to let me in. I smiled a little, walking in his room, glancing around to find it much the same aside from some books and his phone charging on the nightstand, setting the bag of food down on his bed.

"I got you Fettuccine pasta, since you liked that the most," I explained, setting the food out as Cas closed the door.

"Wasn't I an angel before though?" He queried, sitting on his bed, though still keeping his distance from me.

"Yes, until Nira and Metatron both stole your grace. We had just got it back the second time before-" I trailed off, clearing my throat. "Here's a uh, fork for you."

I pushed a plastic fork over to him and some napkins, before focusing on getting my own food out.

"Before what?" Cas prodded, and I glanced up at him as I sat on the edge of his bed with my own pasta plate in hand.

"Before we got trapped in The Empty," I said softly, eating some of my pasta.

"What happened?"

"Well, we tried figuring out where we were. You finally figured it out after I busted up my leg and had started loosing my memories. We had to lock ourselves in a room in this abandoned hospital to regroup."

"Why did you get out and I didn't?"

Thinking that very thing but in different words hurt, but hearing him say it aloud, was a whole new set of knives, and I knew he didn't mean it that way, but it was the worst gibe I'd ever received.
"Because you sent me back," I woefully twisted my pasta around my fork, watching it twist and tangle around it. "I didn't want you to, but you did."

"Why?" He asked in surprise.

"Because if you were going to die, I wasn't going to leave you to die alone."

A silence fell over the room, and I didn't dare look over at Cas. I didn't want to see the emptiness, the blasé indifference.

_And it hurts even more because it feels like you did die..._

"Dean, did you love me?"

I couldn't breathe, and I didn't trust my voice, my fingers squeezing around my fork.

"You don't love me, so does it really matter?" I said bitterly, eating my forkful of bland pasta.

He said nothing, and when I risked a glance at him, he was just staring down at his food, having still not touched it.

"I'm just trying to piece together who I was before," he said softly, almost repentantly.

I took a breath, pushing around my fork.

"You were strong, smart, but a bit naive," I said finally, taking a breath. "We first met when you rescued me from hell, although I don't remember that part, just the after, and finding this." I put down my plate, pulling my arm out of my shirt sleeve, pushing up my shirt over my shoulder, Cas' eyes widening as he saw his handprint. "Scared the hell out of me finding it, and it hurt like a son of a bitch," I chuckled, putting my arm back through my shirtsleeve and pulling my shirt back down. "Bobby and I finally summoned you at this old barn, and that's the first time I saw you, though I didn't believe you when you said that you were an angel, and I might've stabbed you... and shot at you..."

I couldn't help but chuckle at Cas' glare, looking away and remembering.

"You had the biggest stick up your ass then, the most stuck up person I'd ever met in my life, but you got better over the years. There's really too many things that have happened for me to tell you everything, but our friendship really started when you helped Sam and I stop the apocalypse."

"The apocalypse?"

"Yeah," I sighed, scratching my neck. "Like I said, there's a lot."

He nodded, taking a tentative bite of his food.

"I would like to hear about all of it sometime," he said softly, chewing on his food.

"Sure," I nodded at his food. "Good?"

"Extremely," he said, shifting awkwardly. "Dean, thank you for the food."

"Don't mention it," I murmured, chewing on my food.

"I-if you don't mind, I'd like to get some rest..." Cas said suddenly, and it caught me off guard, Cas still sitting with a full plate of food.
"Y-yeah," I stammered, trying not to think too much of it, picking up the trash. "You uh, you know where I'll be."

He nodded silently, and I quietly walked out his room, closing the door behind me.
I slept somewhat better that night, but my chest ached more knowing that Cas was on the other side of that wall.
I hadn't really appreciated it then, but now, I was missing the way Cas had wrapped his body around me while he slept, like a koala clinging to a tree, his body warm and comforting. I missed that untouchable, invincible sensation he gave me when he held me in his arms, like any pieces I'd lost of myself were with him, just waiting to be reunited with me.
I made do with holding a pillow to my chest to help ease the hollowness in my chest, but it just wasn't the same.
Things were a bit easier the next day, most of the tension gone at the bunker. I helped Sam and Jazz do some research to try and find anything to help Cas, Rayne teaching Cas minutiae things, like how to feed the cat, or clean his litter box. It was slightly amusing hearing them talk in the other room, all of Cas' childlike questions. He never once asked Rayne about his past, or about anything else regarding it though, which I found a bit surprising.
I was happy to see that although Cas was still extremely skittish and petrified of most things, he didn't run or shut down as quickly anymore, and it gave me some hope.
Sam, Jazz and I couldn't figure out why he hasn't gone into a feverish state like I had when I got back from The Empty; our only theory was that Cas' grace must've been stripped from him when Nira pulled him back to our world. I remembered when Cas had said that the portal was for humans only, which could've resulted in his newfound humanity, and the change kept him from healing like I had. If my theory was true, it begged an even worse thought, one I didn't want to think about.

What if Cas never got his memories back?

Jazz said there were lots of cases like these, and that sometimes, it would take weeks, sometimes longer for a person's memory to return, and the best thing to do was put them back in the same routine as before, see if it helped trigger anything. We couldn't do more than what we were already doing, the rest up to Cas.
I suggested trying to find another healer, or spell, something to help Cas, but I knew from experience finding that would be a hard feat. Not to mention that Cas' biology was different, having been an angel. There were just too many variables, and it left my head spinning, my nerves fried with worry. On my way to my room that night, Cas nervously stopped me, shyly asking if he could hear more of my stories of the past, which I heartily agreed, the two of us sitting on his bed as we talked.
I told him more about the time we first met, telling him everything in detail, and answering his every question. It was late when Cas started getting tired, so I left him alone to process everything.
The next day passed much the same, and I drove into town with Sam to pick up more lore books, checking the library, but finding nothing of interest. It was late by the time we got back, eating an awkward dinner between the five of us. As awkward as it was though, it comforted me to see everyone there - whole more or less - but safe.
Again, Cas asked me to continue my history retelling, and by the time Cas was too tired to hear more, I was finishing telling him about the time Zachariah pulled a Back into the Future on me by sending me to Croatoan twenty fourteen. It became a nice routine between us, ending the days with a past recap, Cas listening to my every word attentively, and while I normally would've shortened the story and stuck to the basics, I didn't feel that I annoyed Cas with all the details, so I was sure to tell him all the details. Sure, it made things slower, but I grew to look forward to our time together at the end of the day, though Cas never broached the subject of us, or let me get within touching distance, and I in turn, kept things neutral, although a part of me longed to touch him again. To kiss him when he got this doe-eyed, fascinated look in his eyes whenever I told him about something that either he or I had done that he seemed to find noteworthy. It was the only time the still lingering terror in his
eyes seemed to leave him, and I made sure to tell him every detail of how strong he had been, of how strong he was.

It wasn't until about a week later, when I was delving into what had happened after the leviathans killed him, when Cas asked something I wasn't expecting.

"Dean," he said, shifting in his nest of pillows he always made at the top end of his bed. "We were a couple, correct?"

"Uh, yes we were, but that happened later."

"Did we take pictures together then like these?" He held out the photo booth pictures of us, the edges more creased than I remembered.

"Um... sorta." I flushed, rubbing the back of my neck as I remembered the pictures and video I had of Cas and I from that night under the stars.

"What do you mean Dean? And why are you blushing?" He titled his head in confusion, the one thing that hadn't changed even when almost everything else about him had.

"I don't know if they're the best things to show you yet..." I chuckled awkwardly, shifting on the edge of the bed.

"Show me," he demanded, gaze hardening in that damn stubborn scowl of his.

"Fine, fine," I pulled out my phone, scrolling to the first picture I had of us, which was Cas and I sitting in the impala at a stoplight, the both of us smiling at the camera.

I handed my phone to Cas, fiddling with Mary's ring on my finger while Cas scrolled through the photos, and I got more and more nervous as he kept scrolling, just waiting for him to react to the pictures I had taken of him in his post orgasmic haze that night we pulled over to look at the stars. I knew he'd found the pictures when he gasped, and I flushed.

"I-I took those in the heat of the moment," I stammered in embarrassment, a part of me wishing I hadn't handed him my phone.

I blushed a deeper red when he played the video of us going at it a second time, and I buried my face in my hands in mortification at the gasps and moans coming through the speaker of my phone, mostly embarrassing, needy sounds from me.

"And y-you took that one..." I mumbled through my hands, swallowing thickly. "You told me not to delete it, so I didn't."

"I see why," Cas said simply, handing me back my phone, and I was too flustered and embarrassed to ask what he meant.

The next day at dinner, the five of us were in an animated conversation about relationships, all of us laughing.

"I bet you Sam is too loud," I said conspiratorially to Rayne, who burst out laughing while Sam scowled at me, though Jazz was smiling. "There was one time he made a werewolf transform and it wasn't even nighttime."

"Wow, you brought the animal out in her," Rayne snickered, and I burst out laughing, even Jazz joining me while Sam glared at us.
"Shut up," he snapped, tossing a French fry at me.

"Is it customary to film yourselves while you and your partner are having intercourse?" Cas suddenly asked, and I choked on the fry Sam had tossed at me.

"Well," Rayne said while Jazz and Sam laughed. "No, unless you're a porn star or just kinky."

"Jeez Rayne, say it like it is," I said in an effort to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"I wasn't a porn star, was I Dean?" Cas asked, and conversation at the table went silent for a second before there was a rupture of laughter.

"Uh, n-no Cas," I stammered, trying to figure out how to keep him from saying anything more.

"Porn stars are loud and obnoxious people anyways, you're not like that Cas," Rayne said with a warm smile at him, Sam laughing even harder. I was about to ask why Rayne said that both out of curiosity and to save myself from embarrassment, but Cas cut me off before I could.

"Then is Dean one? He was very vocal in the video of us having intercourse."

There was a collective gasp of surprise at the table, Sam's loud laughs cutting off into a coughing choke as I felt my cheeks instantly burn in mortification.

"Did I just hear what I think I did...?" Rayne asked with an incredulous smile, and Jazz giggled.

"I think the boys are out of the closet."

"What? Did I say something wrong?" Cas frowned, and I saw him look at me out of my peripheral vision. "Dean, why are you blushing?"

I wanted to have a heart attack and fall over dead, or have some supermassive black hole appear and swallow me whole, but of course, I was stuck at that damn table with the incredulous laughter and surprised comments, Cas still talking to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying.

"Wow, I never took you for the kinky type Dean," Rayne smirked over her cup of water and I groaned in embarrassment.

"Nice to know things I never wanted to," Sam remarked dryly while Rayne and Jazz laughed, and I lifted my head to see that he was looking between Cas and I, but to my surprise, he didn't look angry.

"You're not mad...?" I asked, and I could faintly hear the girls getting up, calling Cas to help them clean.

"Of course not, why would I be mad?" Sam asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"I-I don't know... I just... kinda thought you would be..."

"We're gonna watch a movie in the living room, when you guys are ready," Jazz said as Rayne and Cas walked out of the room, Jazz casting me a warm, comforting smile.

"Okay babe, we'll be there." Sam said, pushing back his chair, grabbing his plate before looking back at me as Jazz left the room. "Dean, I'm not mad at all. I'm happy for you."

"Wh-" I stammered, at a loss for words, picking up my own plate and robotically following him.

"You're happy?"
"Of course," Sam said, taking my plate and cleaning it in the sink. "I've seen the way you and Cas have looked at each other throughout the years, not to mention acted around each other. I knew you guys loved each other."

"How?" I said dumbly, unable to really think of any better responses.

"Because the way you move around Cas is the way I used to move around Jess," he smiled at me, a hint of sadness in his eyes.

"Sam..." I whispered, not sure how to reply to that.

"It's okay, I have Jezebel now." He smiled warmly down at the plate he was cleaning, rinsing it off then putting it on the rack to dry, before turning to me, and pulling me in for a hug. "Dean, you deserve to be happy, and anyone who makes you happy is made of gold, and I know for a fact that Cas is the purest gold there is."

I laughed weakly, wrapping my arms tightly around my brother, his hair tickling my face.

"Also, I already knew," he whispered conspiratorially, and I gasped, leaning back to glare at him.

"Did Jazz tell you?" I demanded, the blush from earlier that had been fading returning, my ears hot.

"No, though she already knew when I asked her about it," he shook his head, looking a bit sheepish. "Remember the day after you got drunk then you went to the coffee shop and ended up taking Cas with you? How you holed yourself up in your room for the rest of the next day?"

"Yeah..." I said warily.

"Yeah, well, I heard your bedroom door open, and I decided to go see how you were doing since you hadn't come out all day. It took me awhile to find you, but by the time I got there, I saw the whole thing. First kiss and all."

"Oh god, Sam." I flushed, covering my face with my hands in embarrassment, and he laughed good-naturedly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to," he said with a sheepish smile. "I figured you decided to not pursue things with Cas with the way you left soon after that, but uh, I knew that wasn't the case that night when we got you back and it was Cas' turn to keep an eye on you. Jazz and I thought you guys were fighting, but right as we were about to open the door, we uh, realized what was really happening..." He chuckled awkwardly, and I felt my cheeks burn a deeper shade of red.

"Son of a bitch..." I muttered in embarrassment, and Sam chuckled.

"Don't worry about it Dean, it's fine."

"So, you knew? This whole time?"

"Yep."

"Why didn't you tell me? Or say something?"

"I know how hard it can be for you to accept things at times, and I knew acknowledging your feelings for Cas would probably be the hardest thing for you to accept. So, I left things alone, because I wanted you guys to figure things out at your own pace, and not feel the pressure of me knowing in case you guys decided you didn't want that and that your feelings didn't run that deep,"
he shrugged. "You probably wanted to sit me down with Cas and tell me that way, but I think this coming out story is way better." He snickered, jumping out of the way as I went to slug his shoulder.


"Jerk."

I couldn't help but smile at that, hugging him again, Sam returning my hug.

"Thanks."

"Welcome."

We pulled away, and Sam was grinning mischievously and I furrowed my brow.

"What?"

"You better get back to your boyfriend, he might be getting lonely," Sam snickered, and I hated the heat that burned on my cheeks.

"You're never gonna let this go, are you?"

"Nope," he reached into the fridge, grabbing a beer and tossing me one with a grin. "I waited over two years for the secret to be made public, you better believe you're not gonna hear the end of it."

I sighed, rolling my eyes as Sam laughed, the two of us walking to the living room.

"Hey guys, nice of you to join us," Rayne smiled warmly at us as we walked in. "We decided to watch American Graffiti."

"Good choice," I commented, Sam sitting next to Jazz on the couch, the only other spot for me to sit was on the loveseat with Cas, but the slight fear in his eyes kept me from sitting in the chair next to him.

So I sat on the floor, leaning on the loveseat, watching the movie from there.

It was nice, the five of us watching a movie, and it almost felt normal, and I began to feel like everything would be okay. I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off of me knowing that Sam accepted me and Cas without judgement, and I couldn't help but smile in the dim light, and even though Cas wasn't fully there, and wasn't comfortable enough touching me yet, or letting me into his space, him just being there and safe, was perfect.

I couldn't be happier.

The movie played on, all of us getting sleepy, and when it ended, Sam, Jazz and Rayne were getting up, and I looked over to see that Cas was asleep.

"You'll get him in bed?" Rayne whispered as Sam and Jazz left the room after saying goodnight.

"Yeah," I whispered. "I'll see you in the morning."

She nodded with a smile, waving goodbye before leaving.

Carefully getting up, I looked at Cas, who was sleeping soundly on the loveseat, curled in the corner, and I couldn't find it in myself to wake him up.

So I stalked over to the blanket rack we had, grabbing our fuzziest blanket, gently draping it over Cas as he slept on, leaving the TV on for him as a kind of nightlight since he was still too scared to sleep in the dark.
Turning around, I went to walk out of the room.

"Dean?"

"Yeah Cas?" I said softly, walking back over to him, the colors from the TV dancing over him like a kaleidoscope as the movie started playing again.

"Stay," he whispered so quietly, I almost couldn't hear him.

I didn't move from leaning over the back of the loveseat, unsure of what exactly he wanted.

"Yeah, sure," I said finally, walking over to the blanket rack. "I'll sleep on the couch."

He shook his head, grabbing the blanket I had draped over him and stood up, pointing to the loveseat.

"You want me to sleep there..?" I asked slowly.

He nodded, staring down at the ground.

"You sure Cas..?"

He nodded again, standing there as shy as a girl who had just bore herself naked for the first time to eyes other than her own.

"Okay, I'll just lay down like this-" I slowly walked over to the loveseat, easing down to lie on my back, looking up at him in concern. "And then I can show you where you would be," I held my hand out to him, letting him decide, his eyes appraising my hand with wariness. "I can leave if you want Cas..."

"No," he said quickly, reaching out and tentatively taking my hand, stepping closer to me.

"Good. Now, you just lay between my legs on my stomach, okay?" I explained, and he nodded, pulling the blanket with him as he awkwardly got on the couch, his eyes looking down and I could see his shoulders rising and falling with nervous breaths.

"Come here," I whispered, holding my arms out.

Let me fix you.

He took a breath, seemingly steeling himself before he laid himself down on my chest, letting me wrap my arms around him, fixing the blanket so it covered us.

He was stiff and tense against me, but I said nothing, and he froze up as I gently rubbed his back, but he eventually relaxed against me, sinking into me, and I could faintly feel his breaths and heartbeat through my shirt. He felt so small, so tiny, so beaten down by things he didn't even want to say, and I tightened my arms around him, wishing I could've protected him, wishing I could've saved him sooner.

My breath caught in my throat when he tentatively wrapped his arms around my waist, whispering against my chest.

"Is this what we did?" He asked softly.

"No," I tucked the blanket tighter around him, gently running my fingers through his hair. "This is a first."

He hummed in some sort of satisfaction, and I could've sworn I felt him smile.
I gently ran my fingers through his hair, feeling the tenseness slowly dissolve, until his breaths steadied and leveled out, deep with sleep.
I smiled a little, pulling him closer to me, and letting myself fall asleep to the rhythm of his soft breaths.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this update was so late! I prefer to write 5-6 chapters ahead so in case I decide to change the plot, it's no issue. XD I dunno, I like to let myself be free creatively that way.

Either way, I hope you all enjoyed that and are having a lovely summer. I'll catch you guys next chapter, and as always, thank you for the support! And follow my Instagram @ffsmish for more!
Seven

Click.

Click.

Click.

A strange sound kept nagging at my mind, and I shifted, squinting open my eyes. I came to find Rayne and Jazz were standing behind the couch, snapping photos with their phones of me above, and I abruptly remembered that Cas and I had fallen asleep cuddling on the couch.

"Come on guys," I groaned, pushing away their phones as they laughed, Cas jerking awake on top of me.

"You come on. Look, you guys are fucking adorable," Rayne held her phone in front of me, and I blinked, trying to clear the sleepiness from my eyes.

I had to admit in the privacy of my mind, it was damn cute. Cas' lips were pouted slightly in that way they always did when he slept, his arms wrapped tightly around my waist, while my arms cradled his upper chest.

I was suddenly aware that Cas' koala cuddle grip hadn't changed at all, and he was still clinging tightly to me, looking up at everyone warily, and I instantly felt a surge of something I only felt with Sam, but I couldn't name in the moment.

"Alright guys, could we have some space?" I grumbled, pushing Rayne's phone away while Jazz giggled beside her.

"I'll send you the pictures Dean," Jazz smiled, and I sighed in annoyance to see a sleepy Sam walk in, a steaming cup of coffee on his hands.

"What's going on?" He muttered, languidly drinking his coffee.

"Apparently exhibit cuddling," I rolled my eyes.

Sam leaned over in between the space Jazz and Rayne provided, peering down at Cas and I a moment before nodding.

"Adorable," he muttered, and I flushed as the girls giggled, a small grin rising on his face as he turned around.

"Jazz, honey, could you make some pancakes?" Sam asked as he walked out the room, and I could hear Jazz following him, saying she would if she had help, which Rayne volunteered to do, winking playfully at me before leaving the room.

It got quiet after everyone left, their voices fading down the hallway, leaving only me and Cas' soft breaths filling the silence.
"Guess we better get up." I sighed as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, though my words were the last thing I wanted to do.

"You want to?" Cas asked, lifting his head to look at me, his posture as stiff and as tense as it was last night again, and I felt like he was going to bolt if I made the wrong move.

"No," I admitted, rubbing my eyes.

"Why?"

"Why?" I repeated, shrugging. "It's cozy."

"That's all?" Cas prodded, ocean blue eyes probing mine, and while I could sense his genuine curiosity for my reply, something about the way he was looking at me didn't feel right.

I shrugged again, and I could feel the inkling of a blush coming on despite Cas' insinuating stare.

"It's uh, it's nice to have you here. Especially since you've been gone so long."

He tilted his head slightly.

"You missed me?"

"Of course I did-" I trailed off, the 'I love you' on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't quite say it.

"What?" He asked, noticing my lapse, his eyes wandering over my face.

"Nothing," I licked my bottom lip out of nervous habit, and he was quick to follow the movement, and my heart started pounding with the thought of kissing Cas again after so, so long.

I was frozen in Cas' gaze, Cas frozen in mine as well. His eyes were trained on my lips, and I watched his tongue dart out to trace over his bottom lip for a split instant before disappearing, pink skin moist, and my stomach twisted with butterflies.

Would he let me? Did he want to?

I carefully reached up to cup the back of his head, intent on closing the distance between us, but he tensed up, breaking my embrace, pulling away and sitting up so fast, I got a head rush.

"Cas?" I said worriedly, but he said nothing, and just darted out of the room, bare feet slapping against the floor.

I sighed, rubbing my face before I sat up, wincing at the slight creak in my neck, but it was worth it being able to hold Cas in my arms again.

After putting away the blankets, I made my way to my room, passing the kitchen as a bout of feminine laughter echoed out of the room, and I couldn't help but smile at the sound.

I had to say, it was nice having women around, and Jazz had been keeping the bunker in tip top shape for the past year. She kept it so clean in fact, that she gave the word 'clean' a new definition.

One of the best things about having feminine companions though, was that our endless nights of crappy out-of-a-grease-stained-bag meals were over, aside from the times we had to eat out on hunts. When Rayne moved in a couple weeks after my recovery, the double blend of femininity changed the bunker, and here and there little decorative things popped up; a painting, candles, rugs, pillows - everything that wasn't needed and things that Sam and I never bothered with, but little things that never failed to make the bunker feel more like home, and I had no complaints with the ever changing decor and amazing food both Rayne and Jazz cooked.
Passing Cas' closed door now, I went into my room and closed the door, debating on if I should leave Cas alone or try to coax him back out as I dressed and freshened up. Once I was finished several minutes later, I decided to try and coax him out, walking out of my room and knocking on his door.

"Cas?" I said, leaning towards his door in an effort to hear him. "You should come out and eat."

"I'm not hungry."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

I frowned, chewing on my bottom lip.

"Come on, please Cas?"

"Dean, I said I'm fine!" He exclaimed, and a tense silence fell between us.

A part of me wanted to still try and get him out, while another felt it would be best to just leave him be, so in my quandary, I just stood there in silence.

"You know where I'll be if you need me," I said finally, turning and walking down the hallway when he didn't reply.

Everyone was already sitting at the table to eat when I came in, everyone smiling in acknowledgment to me as I pulled out my chair next to Rayne.

"Where's Cas?" Rayne asked as I sat down.

"He's not feeling well," I replied, scooting my chair in and grabbing an empty plate.

"Isn't he hungry?" Jazz queried.

"He said he wasn't." I grabbed some pancakes, forking them onto my plate, hoping they would stop asking me about him.

"Jazz," Sam cut in, forking up more eggs for himself. "Didn't you say we needed some more eggs and milk?"

"Yeah, we do. Why, did you want to go get some?"

"I'll go," I volunteered, pouring some syrup on my pancakes.

"Great. I'll make you a list." Jazz smiled at me, and I gave her a small smile back.

"Mind if I come with?" Sam asked.

"No."

"You okay, Dean?" Sam asked, gazing at me worriedly from across the table.

"I'm fine," I grumbled, eating some of my pancakes.

"You sure?"

"Yes Sam, I'm fine."
Conversation at the table was a bit awkward after that, and I was quick to finish my breakfast, Cas still not making an appearance.

A part of me hoped he would show up as Sam and I were getting in the impala thirty minutes later, asking to come with, but he never came, and I was hating the vile thoughts that were creeping into my mind.

The drive to town was quiet, and for once, Sam didn't complain to me for blaring Black Sabbath. Once at the store, Sam spoke for the first time in the hour of silence between us.

"You want to tell me what's going on, Dean?"

"What do you mean?" I asked as I grabbed a carton of milk.

"You know what. What happened with you and Cas? You guys seemed fine this morning."

"It's nothing." I sighed, putting the milk in the shopping cart.

"Come on Dean, what happened?"

I frowned, pursing my lips as I stared at my reflection in the freezer glass door.

"He just got scared of me, I guess I pushed my limits. He'll be fine," I grumbled, hoping he would drop the subject.

"Why?"

"Why does it matter Sam?" I snapped, quieting as an old lady glanced over at us disapprovingly.

"Because I know Cas means the world to you, and I want to do everything I can to help." He said softly, hazel eyes wide and repentant.

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck.

"Thanks, but trust me, what happened this morning won't help in any way to getting his marbles back." I pushed the shopping cart down the aisle, looking for the cheese.

"I sure hope that couch is sanitary then."

I whipped my head around to glare at Sam, who was grinning devilishly.

"Come on Sam, you really think we did that?"

"Who knows," he shrugged, putting his hands in his jean pockets as I grabbed some cheese. "I told you that you wouldn't hear the end of this."

I rolled my eyes, muttering under my breath, and he laughed.

"Don't let it get to you Dean." Sam assured me as he grabbed some eggs after a short silence. "Cas will come around, he is as we speak."

"What makes you so damn sure?" I muttered.

"Because he wanted you to hold him last night, didn't he?"

I paused, my eyes glued on the egg cartoon that had a bright blue logo on it, advertising free roam chicken laid eggs.
"I don't think it's that cut n' dry Sam," I exhaled, pushing the shopping cart farther down the aisle.

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing."

"Dean," Sam stopped in front of the shopping cart, forcing me to stop. "Don't lead me on like that. Tell me, what is it?"

I chewed on my bottom lip, looking at the rainbow colored cereal boxes, the happy go-lucky dumb cartoon characters plastered over the fronts.

"It's stupid," I shrugged, embarrassed. "Forget it."

"Dean, if it's bothering you this much, it's not stupid."

"Fine then," I hissed, glaring over at him. "I don't think Cas is getting better, and I don't think last night was improvement at all."

"Why?"

"Because he just looks at me like I'm some god damn science lab rat!" I exclaimed, my fingers clenching hard over the shopping cart handle. "He just looks at me like he's trying to figure out why he ever gave a damn about me, and it's obvious he doesn't know why he ever did."

"Don't say that."

"Why not?" I smiled bitterly at him. "Since when does luck ever favor us in our lives? Let's face it, I've lost Cas just when I thought I'd found him. It's done."

"So what, you're just giving up?" Sam demanded as I maneuvered the shopping cart around him.

"No, I'm just not going to give myself false hopes."

"Do you think Cas would ever give up hope on you?"

I stopped, a sharp pain throbbing through my chest as I remembered the look on his face right before he mentally sacrificed himself for me to get home.

"No," I swallowed thickly, fully remembering that pain from that day. "Because it should've been me."

"Dean, come on," Sam exclaimed, speed walking after me as I moved on to the next aisle. "Don't say that, not again."

"Not 'again'?" I hissed, glaring at him. "Don't drag Lisa and Ben into this."

"Then stop blaming yourself for things you can't control." Sam said, staring incredulously at me. "You couldn't stop what happened with Lisa and Ben, and you couldn't stop what happened with Cas. Either way, if Cas remembered anything, he'd probably say he'd do the same thing over again. He will come around Dean, he just needs time."

"Yeah," I sighed, grabbing a bag of chips and tossing them into the shopping cart. "Sure."
The ride home was quiet, and I left Sam and everyone else to their own devices after Sam and I put the groceries away.
I was happy to get the library to myself with no interruptions as I scoured the Internet for any inklings of information that could potentially help Cas over beer after beer.
I finally couldn't find it in myself to focus after my sixth beer, listlessly spinning the caps over the mahogany wood table, listening to its loud, metallic skittering in the silence. I was bored, frustrated, and lonely, wishing things were different, and wishing I was out with Cas on a hunt, rather than fearing for his sanity every second.
The dull, placid stares he had given me that morning still haunted me in particular, even though that dull stare of his had been a close friend of mine lately. The haunting stares lacking the emotion and passion they once held when they gazed upon me... No longer viewing me as a treasure, but just as any old regular Joe.

And it hurt...

I had tried ignoring the ice cold squeezes of terror in my chest knowing this over the last near month, and I had been able to ignore it up to this point, but after this morning, I no longer could. A part of me was terrified that Cas would never want me again the way he used to, but the another part of me argued with the other half, saying that Cas did care, and that he was coming around.

He just needed time, right?

Despite the compelling argument the optimistic side of myself presented, I still felt uneasy. Things were just too different with Cas for me to find an in-between, semi-comfortable place of some sort of assurance for me to settle in, and I could almost feel myself aging prematurely from the anxiety.
I heaved a heavy sigh, resting my head in my hands, trying to find the will to get up to get another beer.

"Dean! Happy hour start already?"

I jerked in my seat, startled to find Gerald grinning at the foot of the table, brown bag in his hand.

"Hey man," I smiled, standing up to greet him.

"Been awhile mate," he beamed, a few new tattoos peaking out of the collar of his red shirt along with a small silver lip ring glimmering against his tan skin. "Heard about your little Alice in Wonderland, quite a story."

"Yeah," I crossed my arms over my chest, shrugging. "I'm alive."

"So I've seen." He set a brown paper bag down on the table, reaching into it and pulling out a brand new glass bottle of scotch and a pack of cigars. "I brought the big guns."

"Lay it on me," I passed him two glass cups as he opened the scotch cap, pouring the amber liquid in the glasses.

"Sam told me to tell you that tonight is cereal night, since the girls wanted a break from cooking." Gerald explained, pushing one of the scotch filled glasses towards me. "I told him that I got us covered."

"I'll say," I agreed, gesturing to the chair across from me for Gerald to sit as I leaned back in my own chair, taking a swig from the cup, the liquid burning my throat and I coughed a little.
"Strong stuff, yeah?" Gerald asked, offering me a cigar, which I declined and he lit the one in his hand.

"Where'd you get it? I like," I cleared my throat as I took another sip of it.

"Got it as a thank you gift from this rich broad I saved a couple days ago; ghost daddy troubles." He took a long drag from his cigar and I chuckled.

"Was she hot?"

"Only her body," Gerald clicked his tongue in regret, exhaling, a thick cloud of smoke building around him. "So, more?" He asked, nodding to my empty cup.

"Yeah," I pushed my cup over to him, and he refilled my glass.

"So," Gerald sat back in his chair, crossing his feet on the table. "What have you been up to mate?"

"So much damn research, I think I know what it feels like to be Sam." I sighed, rubbing my face. "I think I've read so much, I'm forgetting how to read."

"Sounds like I came just in time," he winked at me, and I chuckled wryly, drinking.

"What brings you here?"

"Was cruising through the way on route to a case in Oklahoma, and I decided to stop by, see how Dean Winchester is doing after being spit out of The Empty."

"Over a year later," I pointed out.

"I'm not a woman, so I don't have the daily gossip being fed into my brain every ten seconds," he chuckled, and I chuckled wryly. "But you were pretty much delirious for a couple months, yeah?"

"Yeah." I affirmed, filling my glass again, my body starting to tingle from the alcohol. "So, what have you been up to the last year?"

"The usual," he shrugged, drinking some of his scotch. "Finished college, hunting. The never-ending road trip."

"Sounds fun."

"As much as ever." He sighed, looking over at me, and his eyes narrowed infinitesimally as he scrutinized me. "You look like you need to get out."

"Trust me, it won't help." I rubbed my face, chuckling torpidly.

"Ah come on Dean," he leaned over to clap my shoulder. "Where's that spunk of yours?"

"Not here." I smiled emotionlessly and he laughed.

"Well, I've got something that can take your mind off of things if you want."

"What's up?"

"Something is up with my car," he shrugged. "You're a better mechanic than me, feel like taking a look?"
"Sure." I stood up after I refilled my cup with scotch. "What's wrong with it?"

"I don't know, just doesn't run right and has trouble shifting." He explained as we walked to the garage.

"Probably needs transmission fluid," I sighed, drinking my scotch. "I think I got a bottle."

"Damn, I should've thought of that." Gerald sighed, following me into the garage, leaning on the side of his black 69' mustang once we were inside, still smoking his cigar, the smoke rising in the air like ghosts.

"Can't always think of everything." I sighed, putting aside my cup as I grabbed the bottle of transmission fluid I had off the shelf, Gerald opening the hood.

"True." He agreed, standing off to the side as he watched me check the oil. "So, what are you gonna do tonight mate?"

"Aside from fixing your car? Nothing."

He laughed, putting out his cigar and tossing it in the trash, walking back over to lean on the car next to me.

"What would you like to do?"

"I'm doing it." I grinned, lifting up my glass and he laughed.

"How are you still coherent mate? There was like, seven beer bottles on the table and isn't that your third glass of the goods I brought?"

"S'not without difficulty." I muttered, closing up the cap to the transmission fluid. "She should be fine now."

"Thanks Dean." He clapped my shoulder, walking around to the drivers side door and turning the car on, the radio blasting some new age rap music as he revved the engine.

"She sounds great," I approved, grinning as I stepped away to lean against the impala after I closed the hood of Gerald's car.

"She'll roll for another couple hundred miles." He approved, turning the car off, but leaving the radio on. "How's the Impala?"

"Baby? Ah, she's just as good as ever." I patted the hood affectionately, drinking the last of my scotch, my body warm and numb now.

"That's good to hear." Gerald chuckled, walking over to stand by me, the radio still playing in his car.

"What's this crap?" I gestured to his car, not at all amused with his music.

"This 'crap' is called rap, Eminem to be exact."

"Change it or somethin'," I muttered.

"Awe what? You don't like it?"

I shook my head, pushing myself off the side of the impala and walking over to grab my keys off the
key hook screwed into the wall. Once my keys were in hand, I turned around, walking back and shut off Gerald's car, who exclaimed in protest, which I ignored as I turned on the impala's radio, Eye of The Tiger blaring through the speakers as I turned the music up.

"Now this," I smiled, leaning back against the impala. "Is good music."

"Do you like any music made after 95'?"

"Not really." I chuckled, and he shook his head.

"At least play something I know mate."

"Like what?"

"Well-" he stepped around me, opening the back door and rifled through my box of cassette tapes. "First off, buy CDs or an iPod or something."

"New and shiny? Pass."

"Or go back to your time period old man..." Gerald muttered, and I rolled my eyes, almost falling over as my grip on the impala slipped.  

*Woah, that stuff is really kickin' in now.*

"Here we go," Gerald exclaimed, hitting his head on the roof of the car with a pained groan as he went to stand up, much to my amusement.

"W-what you got?" I snickered, laughing as I watched Gerald struggle to put the cassette tape in the radio.

"One word - Nirvana." He grinned proudly to himself as Teen Spirit started playing.

"Nirvana is good, but come on man." I rolled my eyes. "Everyone knows about them and this song."

He ignored me, leaning on the side of the car as he bobbed his head to the song.

"Do you have your groupie t-shirt somewhere?"

"Shut up Dean." He sighed in exasperation, stumbling around to lean back inside the car to stop the music. "Then why don't you play somethin' good?"

"Anything else in that damn box could teach you what real music is."

"Fine," Gerald said, taking clumsy care to put his arm in the window of the impala, hand in my cassette box. "Then I'll pick a random cassette tape out of this, and you bet it'll be better than Eminem and not some teen groupie music?"

"Hell yeah."

"You're on." He grinned, the cassette tapes clinking against each other as he shuffled through them. He shuffled through them for a good while before he finally pulled one out.

"S'which one is it?" I slurred, trying to see which one he'd picked.

"One approved by Dean Winchester." He winked at me, hiding the cassette tape from my view and
sticking it in the radio.

Aerosmith began playing through the speakers, and Gerald burst out laughing.

"Are you sure you're not some teen groupie?" Gerald snickered, and I scoffed.

"No, it's not my fault you suck at random picking."

"So does that mean that all your music is teen groupie music?"

"No!" I exclaimed, and he laughed. "Aerosmith is awesome."

"Don't get so worked up Dean," he put his hand on my shoulder as he grinned devilishly. "I've just been jerking your chain."

"You're an asshole," I muttered, shifting my stance against the impala, only to almost lose my balance again.

"At least I'm not clumsy," he chuckled, grabbing my forearm and holding me in place.

I was about to retort, say something witty in response, but I lost my train of fuzzy, half thought out thoughts when my eyes landed in Gerald's hazel gaze. I had never noticed before, but his eyes were a yellowish-green on the outsides, then a soft brown in the center, the same soft brown his mass of curly hair was. I had never noticed the short stubble on his face, or the seemingly permanent indent in his left cheek, like he was just on the verge of laughing, his lip ring silver in the light. His dark brows were furrowed together in a mix of concern and amusement could've explained his amused tiny smirk, but I was too hazy-minded to really say. The smell of his cigar and some sweet masculine scent enveloped me, and I was completely frozen in his gaze, watching his eyes flicker between my eyes and my mouth. My pulse started racing in response, and I swallowed thickly, trying to dispel myself from the trance, but I couldn't.

*He wanted to kiss me. Would I? Should I? Could-*

My thoughts froze in their tracks as he shifted slightly, leaning closer to me, his breath on my skin, and I just gaped at him, unable to move or even so much as breathe.

- *you're my angel*

*Come and save me tonight*

*You're my angel*

*Come and make it alright*

Suddenly I couldn't breathe, and I felt like my stomach was ripped out.

*This wasn't right! His eyes are wrong, they're all wrong, they're not blue, they're not blue-*!

"Everyone else can flatter you with a few hollow compliments and win your heart within a matter of hours; I've died for you more than once and you have never once given me a second thought."

*Oh god... He's not Cas, he's not Cas, he's not Cas!*

I felt like I had been sucker punched in the gut as I remembered what had Cas said over a year ago. I remembered his jealousy, and apparent dislike for Gerald. I remembered the way his heart pounded
against my hand as I had coaxed the truth out of him. I remembered what he smelled like, what he felt like, and how he tasted when he kissed me... *How his arms felt when he held me...*

Gerald was all wrong, this was wrong, and oh hell I needed to get away now!

Scrambling away from him, I nearly fell, my clammy palms sliding along the impala as I struggled to right myself.

"Dean?" Gerald said, his face twisted in surprise and worry as he reached out, grabbing my arm again.

"I-I can't." I stammered, breaking his grip on my arm, whirling around and running up to the garage door, and flinging it open.

I ignored Gerald calling after me as the door slammed against the wall in my wake.

I clipped my shoulder on the corner of the wall as I dashed down the hallway, swearing to myself as I stumbled on. My shoulders were aching by the time I rounded the corner to the hallway leading to me and Cas' bedrooms, and Cas' door was closed as usual. Stumbling up to it, I collapsed against it, fumbling with the doorknob.

"Cas?" I asked, my voice so high and shaky, I could barely even recognize it. "Cas... Cas, buddy, please..."

I finally managed to open the door, Cas jumping back in surprise, appearing to have just been on his way to the door. I exhaled seemingly for the first time the second I saw him, and I collapsed against him, wrapping my arms in a death grip around him as I buried my face in his shoulder, Cas frozen in my embrace.

"Cas, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it." I rambled, unable to stop myself, pulling him closer when he suddenly started pushing at me, trying to untangle himself from me. "Cas.. I-I love you..."

I vaguely heard some high pitched, panicked voice, but I couldn't make out what it said, or who it was. But as soon as I said I loved Cas, the hands pushing at me stopped, but before I could revel in his presence, a new pair of hands found me, gripping my shoulders and were pulling me away.

"No!" I exclaimed, panicking and blindly pulling Cas back against my chest, and I could feel the harsh huff of breath against the side of my face in response.

*Not again, I'm not letting you go again. Not again, not again, not again, not ever. Never.*

I didn't recognize the terrified, animalistic sound that was ripped out of my throat when Cas was pulled out of my grasp, and I was blinking rapidly, trying to find him again, because *oh god I'd lost him! I'd lost him again and god I swore I wouldn't and he's gone, he's gone, he's gone!*

*"Come on- Dean."*

I heard vague snippets of words and my name, and I weakly fought against some pair of hands pulling me away, guiding me into a room I didn't recognize. I eventually at some point grew weary of fighting the steady hands and let them help me down onto something soft as I struggled to breathe. I didn't know what was going on, all I knew was that I'd lost Cas again, and it was my fault.

I vaguely felt my body shudder with sobs, and a set of gentle hands running through my hair, shushing me and telling me that it was okay.

*But how could it be okay? Cas was gone, he was gone, I'd lost him. I'd lost him again. I was weak,*
pathetic. I didn't deserve to have Cas, not when all I was good for was loosing him.

The gentle hands settled my head on a lap, but I was too out of it to care to see whose it was, because the thighs that gave my head a place to rest were too small to be Cas'.

Because Cas was gone.

Because I'd lost him again.

Chapter End Notes

Heya guys, sorry I took a freaking month to update... But thank you guys for being so patient, I hope I delivered, lol. Also, thank you guys for 1k on my Instagram, you all are awesome! :) I also posted some new edits to my youtube channel @ffmish to celebrate if you'd like to give em' a watch; I'd love to get your guy's feedback! As always, till the next update guys!

(I do not own the song lyrics to Angel by Aerosmith.)
My wake up call the next morning caused me an early morning greeting with my toilet, and the roaring in my ears was hella unpleasant. I felt like utter shit, the lights too bright, and my head and stomach felt like it was being twisted into taffy. I was just sitting back down on my bed after I had brushed my teeth to rid my mouth of the bile, when there was a soft knock on my door.

"Come in," I grumbled, rubbing my face gingerly.

"Are you decent?" Rayne peeked her head in around my door, giving me a sheepish smile.

"Wouldn't have mattered because you're looking anyways."

"I've seen and am fairly intimate with what the male anatomy looks like, it wouldn't disturb me," she retorted, stepping inside and closing the door softly behind her. "How are you feeling?"

"How do you think?"

"Pretty bad then." She sighed, sitting down beside me on my bed. "Wanna tell me what happened last night?"

"I hardly remember it." I admitted. "Just drinking with Gerald- is he still here?"

"No," she shook her head. "He felt that he should leave after what happened last night.. You really don't remember anything?"

"Not really, no."

"Well..." She sighed, crossing her arms over her chest. "What's uh, the last thing you remember?"

"Um," I rubbed the back of my neck, closing my eyes to keep the light out since my head was pounding still. "Last I remember, was being with Gerald in the garage talking about music."

"Ah, okay, well," Rayne took a breath. "Gerald told us that uh, you ran out of the room like crazy man, and you had apparently gone to Cas' room."

"Oh god..." I groaned, dropping my head in my hands.

"I don't know all that happened, but I ran in right as you told him that you loved him..." Rayne fell quiet, saying nothing as I processed.

"I said that..?" I muttered through my fingers.

"Yeah... You okay?"

"Fine. What else happened."

"Well, Cas had been trying to get away from you until you said that, so.. he heard you, Dean."
"And after that."

She sighed slightly.

"Sam and Gerald had to pull you away from Cas, then you cried yourself to sleep in my lap, though I
swear you were having a panic attack the whole time. I couldn't really understand what you were
saying most of the time, but you said almost over and over, 'I lost him, I lost him'."

"Sorry about that." I sighed heavily, wearily rubbing my forehead.

"Dean..." I looked over at Rayne as her voice cracked, not prepared to see the tears in her eyes.

"Come on, not the waterworks..." I groaned, dropping my head in my hands again.

"Dean, I watched you break in my arms, how can I not cry?" She wiped her eyes, sitting down besides me. "I know what Melanie felt like comforting Rhett when he thought Scarlett was dying..."

"Don't compare me to fictional characters." I sighed, tenderly rubbing my temples. "My life isn't a
damn book, or a fairy tale."

"Maybe not, but I think you should take note of a few things in that book."

"What's that even supposed to mean?" I whined, my mind too foggy and twisted to make sense of
what she was saying.

"Think about what drove two people that could've been happy for the rest of their lives apart."

I lifted my head, ready to ask her to quit talking in damn riddles, but by the time I looked up, she had
closed the door and was gone.

_________________

Too worn out and pain wearied, I fell asleep again for a while after Rayne left, my dreams odd swirls
of Cas being bedridden and I was in old timey clothes, a glass of whisky in my hand as Rayne was at
my feet comforting me in an old fashioned dress.
I woke up thinking for a brief moment that I was Rhett from Gone With The Wind, and Rayne's
words made less sense to me now then they had when she had said them.
I still felt fairly crappy despite my nap, robotically sliding into an old shirt and jeans, dragging myself
out of my room towards the kitchen.
I tried ignoring the anxiety rising in my chest realizing that Cas could be in the kitchen as I saw his
bedroom door was open, but I failed. It didn't help that I couldn't remember what I'd even done to
Cas last night, or even said. It terrified me realizing that in my drunken haze, I had stupidly told Cas I
loved him, according to Rayne.
I sighed, pulling out a coffee cup from the cabinet once I made it into the kitchen, mulling it all over.
The only person that I had told aloud that I loved them, was my mom, and that was years ago in a
revisiting of an old memory when Sam and I died and went to heaven, looking for Joshua at Cas' request. But the one time I loved someone - maybe even for the very first time - I couldn't even bring myself to say it to Cas; not when he first told me he loved me, not when he was practically moaning it in intimacy, not when he had said it as often as he breathed. Not once, not ever.
And now I had said it to him? Now, when he just looked at me like I was a science lab experiment,
and I was as drunk beyond memory?
God, I was a fucking idiot.
I put my steaming cup of coffee down, bracing myself on the counter, squeezing my eyes shut as I
hung my head.
I bet I had royally fucked things up with Cas now. I had gone and fucked up any chance I might've had with him with the one phrase that I should've told him when he needed to hear it, when it would've mattered.

*When he said it back.*
Instead, all I could tell him then was that I needed him like some god damn coward. He had already known I needed him, I'd told him that time and time again. It was my go-to phrase to use when I was on the cusp of loosing him. I never told him I loved him when I should've, when the phrase really had meaning.
Maybe I was meant to loose him. Maybe fate, destiny, or whatever asshole that controlled the bounds outside free will, took Cas from me. Maybe it, they, he, she, whatever, was telling me that I didn't really love Cas. I had been told all my life that I was scared of being alone. "That's why you couldn't let Sam die", and, "Sam is hunting again because of you".
I always dragged the people that were leaving me back with cries of need, or some air-headed stunt with one too many penalties I hadn't thought of, penalties that only hurt or killed the people I wanted to stay with me.
Maybe Sam would've married Jess if I had gone after dad by myself. Ben and Lisa would still be alive, so would Jo, Ash, Ellen, Charlie, Bobby- *so many people...*
And Cas would sure as hell still have his memories. Sure, he'd be sitting on a cloud and still a pompous dick like he was when we first met, but he would be fine, safe. Happy, even.

*I ruined everything.*

I jumped when I heard footsteps coming down the stairs to the kitchen, whirling around to see Cas frozen in the doorway.
He took one look at me before he was spinning around, scrambling to get out of the room.

"Hey-! Uh, Cas! I need to talk to you." I exclaimed, rushing over to the doorway, Cas stopping in the hallway.

"Why." He said coldly, and I swallowed thickly.

"Could we uh, sit down?"

Cas said nothing, was just cold and tense, but he turned around, barging past me in the doorway and sat down at the table, his mouth in a thin line.

"Thanks," I said awkwardly, stepping over to the table and pulling out the chair across from him, sitting down.

"What do you have to say Dean."

His tone was clipped, short and to the point. He was obviously annoyed, his expression much like those of a child getting scolded by its mother, the same hurry-up-and-say-what-you-need-to-say-so-I-can-leave annoyed expression plastered over his face.
I swallowed hard, trying to ignore the lump in my throat, fiddling with the bracelet he'd given me on my wrist under the table.

"I uh, wanted to say I'm sorry. About last night." I cleared my throat, looking down at my hands, before forcing myself to look back up at him. "I was having a rough day, and I should've just tried going to bed instead of drinking."

"So you were drunk."
"Uh, yeah..." I said slowly.

"Are you always drunk when you address your feelings for someone?"

"No.." I sighed, rubbing my face. "Like I said, I'm-"

"Why did you have to be drunk to say you loved me? Why didn't you tell me before Dean?" He demanded.

My stomach dropped, the air ripping out of my lungs and I was in free fall, my hands starting to shake and an incredulous sob ripping its way through my throat.

*He remembered. He remembered. He remembered. He knew that I'd never said I'd loved him. He remembered.*

"Y-you..." I stammered, my mouth hardly working, and my voice sounded like it was cracking into a million pieces. "You... you remember?"

Cas furrowed his brow, tilting his head in confusion and scorn.

"Remember what? I had asked you before if you loved me, Dean, and you denied it."

The joyful sob I was barely holding back changed into hysteria at the snap of a finger, and I felt myself crash hard.

*He didn't remember...*

"W-what?" I stammered stupidly, feeling like a rabbit trapped in a corner about to be torn apart by a lion.

"You've denied your feelings for me every time I've asked you." Cas' voice was low. Dark. Heartless. "I've tried making sense of what you felt, what we were, and I assumed that you just viewed me as a friend you just slept with, given the way you have treated me."

I couldn't breathe, I was frozen, locked in place as I felt myself being ripped to shreds.

"You keep your distance from me, you look at me wishing I was your old friend, and you despise me because in your eyes, he's dead, and I do nothing but remind you of that fact. Then as if you alienating me isn't enough, you burst into my room and confess that you love me, but only after your tongue had been loosened by alcohol." He was angry, glaring belligerently at me, and all I could do was sit there and feel my own throat threaten to choke me. "Is alcohol the only way to evoke any truth from you?"

I bristled, about to retort, but I stopped, suddenly remembering me and Cas' first kiss, how my beer had spilled, how it had led to our lips pressing together for the first time. Then how drunk I had been the night before that...

"I see." Cas said simply, taking my silence as confirmation.

"You don't even remember, so you have nothing to say." I hissed, clenching my fists.

"Would I need to bring copious amounts of alcohol to make certain your retelling of a lost history to me is accurate?"

"I am not a liar."
"My experience with you says differently."

"You know what," I shoved back my chair, ripping the necklace Cas had made me off my neck, throwing it at Cas, the medallion hanging on the necklace clattering to the table as Cas jumped in surprise. "Take your opinions and shove it up your ass. I'm done."

He didn't bother stopping me as I stormed out of the room, speed walking down the hallway, throwing open my bedroom door, the wooden door slamming against the wall as I grabbed my duffel bag. I ripped open my dresser drawers, the photo of me, Sam and mom falling over in my wake as I tore clothes out of my dresser, stuffing them in my duffel bag. I didn't bother folding them or anything, just grabbed all my clothes, my toiletries from the bathroom, and the pool money I had stashed under my bed for emergencies, stuffing it all in my duffel bag.

Zipping my crap up, I threw the bulging bag over my shoulder. I hurried to the garage, too pissed and angry to see straight, and when the garage door refused to open for me, it earned a solid kick, which sent it flying back against the wall.

"Hey, hey, hey." I heard Sam running after me as I grabbed the Impala's keys off the key-hook, opening up the trunk to dump my crap inside. "What's going on?!"

"Just leave me alone Sam." I warned him, closing the trunk and walking around the car to open the drivers side door when I was yanked back and spun around.

"What the hell is wrong with you?! Where are you going?!" Sam demanded, pinning me to the side of the car by my chest.

"Let. Me. Go." I hissed, my anger reaching its boiling point.

"Not until you tell me what the hell is going on." Sam's eyes were hard as steel, his arm pinned across my chest making it harder to breathe.

"I need to leave."

"Why?"

"Just let me go Sam."

"No. I'm not letting you storm out of here like last year. Cas may have let you, but I sure won't."

Grief and anger filled me at Cas' name, and I was livid at Sam's insinuation, finding my arms flying up and shoving Sam off of me, sending him stumbling backwards.

"Cas was not weak!" I yelled, my fist flying into Sam's face and he stumbled backwards a few more feet. "You've always thought he was weak; you've called him an it!"

"I wasn't implying that he was weak!" Sam protested, dodging my next swing, still backing away from me, blood dripping down his chin from his busted lip. "Cas isn't weak!"

"You're damn right he wasn't." I hissed, following each of Sam's steps back with a step forward.

"What do you mean wasn't? He's here Dean!" Sam's back hit the wall, but he stared me down fearlessly, though he had his hands up in surrender. "Dean, take a breath and calm down."

"Don't tell me what to do!" I glared at him belligerently, Sam narrowly dodging my next swing, and I hissed when I hit the wall hard, my hand exploding into agony as my knuckles cracked.
"I'm not trying to! Just take a breath and tell me what's going on, we can fix this!"

"Come back inside," Cas had said softly, blue eyes wide and pleading, his thumb gently rubbing my cheek, his touch calming the war of emotions raging inside me. "We can fix this."

I remembered the look on his face when I left anyway: pale, resigned, broken.

The face of a man who's world was torn apart and set ablaze.

I gasped, stumbling backwards, the crippling agony I had felt when I was coherent enough a near year ago to remember how I had lost Cas sucker punching me, and I couldn't breathe. I could vaguely feel that my hands were shaking.

"Dean..?" Sam said slowly, warily stepping closer to me. "Are you okay..?"

I blinked, looking up at him, my head feeling light and weak, everything fuzzy.

"I-I'm fine..." I stammered, trying to catch my breath when it suddenly hit me.

I'd lost Cas.

I'd lost him again, made him hate me, made the one person I never wanted to despise and distrust me.

I made the only person I'd ever truly loved think I was a drunken liar.

I choked on air, my vision hot and blurry, Sam still staring worriedly at me.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, all I knew was that I needed to get out of here.

I spun around, ignoring Sam calling after me as I ran to the impala, ignoring the agony in my hurt hand as I closed and locked the drivers side door as soon as I slid inside, fumbling with the key to get it in the ignition.

The car flared to life as Sam tried opening the door, and I jammed my foot down on the gas, the car spinning into motion, tires squealing as I left Sam in the dust.
Nine

I drove, and drove, and drove.

I drove far enough to be out of reach of the worried eyes of my brother and his girlfriend. Away from Rayne, and Cas, if the son of a bitch cared enough to even look for me.

I doubted it.

I stopped at some ramshackle bar, drinking my fill when my phone rang, vibrating in my jacket pocket and I pulled it out to look at it, my brother's name spelled out in fat, bold letters across my screen.

I sighed, turning it off and putting it back in my pocket, going back to my whisky.

A few minutes later, my phone buzzed again, and I pulled it out to look at it.

Two missed calls from Sam

One missed call from Rayne

No Cas.

I cursed, clenching my fingers hard over my phone, wishing I was strong enough to crush it. Wishing I was strong enough to crush the stupid, asinine hope that Cas would call. Wishing I could crush the toxic hope that he would say he was sorry, that he loved me too, that he wanted me back.

I clenched my teeth together so hard my jaw hurt as I felt the hot tears burn at the corners of my eyes, and I squeezed my phone as hard as I could, satisfied to hear it crack a little.

I threw it to the floor, stomping my boot hard on it, plastic pieces and tiny bits of wiring spilling out from underneath my shoe. It was so damn satisfying to see and hear it crunch beneath my foot. It felt good, like I was finally taking a stand.

I didn't need Cas. I didn't need anyone. I wasn't some needy bastard who'd rather sell his soul than be alone if I was given a choice a second time. Hell, why go back anyway.

Shoving the phone remains off to the side with little grace, I looked up to see the bartender was staring at me in annoyance, tepidly cleaning a glass.

" Needed an excuse for a new phone." I smirked, downing the shot as the guy rolled his eyes and moved on.

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It was nice not having my phone, and I just drove. Every morning I would blow town, driving until I didn't feel like it, then stopping at the nearest bar
in town, wasting no time on getting wasted. I didn't know what state I was in anymore, didn't know what day it was, what time it was half of the time. I just didn't care. I liked just going and doing whatever the hell I wanted; drinking until the sun rose, hustling pool till all the cocky assholes who thought they could beat me were broke. I even got into a few fights over pool once my hand healed after punching the wall from my fight with Sam. Despite the easy money they gave up and the excuse to punch something, I eventually started feeling bad about fighting. No matter how big or tall the guy was, I always had the upper hand on the drunken dicks from years of practice. Didn't matter if a lucky dumbass managed to get a land on me here or there, it was just too easy.

They all fought the same, and usually with the same lack of grace, their fuel booze a majority of the time. All fists and no finesse. They all seemed to have this weak Bruce Lee imitation going on, fighting as if they were in one of the dumb crime shows they probably watched. It was obvious most of them had never gotten into a fight in their life, their buddies drunkenly cheering them on like idiots.

Despite feeling a little guilty that I could damn near kick anyone's ass who took me on, I still fought them shamelessly. I enjoyed beating up a sore loser too much for my own good, and the girls that witnessed these fights noticed me too.

They raved to me, telling me thanks for teaching that asshole a lesson, that he had done this or that to them or one of their friends. Of course, they wanted to thank me properly, but I denied their advances, just let them buy me drinks and vis versa. I never engaged with them beyond that, and it seemed to only pique their interest in me even more.

The mornings after I had fights, I always had a napkin or two with some woman's number, which I would dump in the glovebox of the impala as a sort of odd trophy after awhile. I wasn't sure why I kept them, because there was no need for me to have them since I no longer had a phone and I always blew town the next morning, but I kept them nonetheless. One night though, I was pretty tipsy, the girl I had been chatting up buying me round after round, and our conversation turned into us in the dark hallway of the bar making out. It felt amazing at first, our hands wildly feeling the other, touching, squeezing and pulling. I was dying to take things farther, but it was only when we broke the kiss that I realized that she had blue eyes.

But they were the wrong color, not the sky as you see it underwater pure blue, that polluted blue with green mixed into it. Her eyes were beautiful, but when she asked me why'd I called her Cas, I tore out of that town faster than The Roadrunner, leaving the poor woman confused and angry, and I stayed far away from blue eyes and brunettes after that.

I was wary of women for a while after that, and my next intimate run in with a woman was a long time after with a hazel eyed blonde, but when push came to shove, I couldn't bring myself to go past the fondling and mouthy kisses. She left after in a series of spats and curses, and my next few run ins with women went in much the same way. I just couldn't bring myself to go beyond the kissing, no matter how pretty the girl or how good her skills were. I eventually got frustrated with myself, not knowing why I couldn't seem to take things all the way. It had been so easy for me before, second nature, even. Why the change now?

The answer always looped back to Cas, a name that I scrambled to find a beer to drown out every time it seeped into my mind. I was tired of being tied to him, tired of hurting, tired of missing him, tired of wanting him. So, telling myself that tonight was the night I would get over all of it, I took the bull by the horns. I got friendly with this brunette, blue-eyed beauty, a pretty girl, but too easy, and I drank every time my mind tried to tell me how the only things her and Cas had in common was the hair and eye color.
We both ended up in a shitty motel room together, wasted out of our minds, and as I told myself I would, I went all the way.

It was fun for a brief moment, all the cresting pleasure, touching a woman's body again after so long, remembering all the tricks I had learned ages ago.

It was great up until that point, but when everything came to its peak, and when I looked down at the woman who's name I couldn't even remember and watched her reach her peak, I was suddenly hit with remembering what Cas' face had looked like when he had reached his own peak. I suddenly then realized I had destroyed all the pictures I had of us in that moment under the stars so long ago and all our other pictures when I'd smashed my phone.

I'd never felt so unfulfilled and lonely after having sex my entire life, and I left as soon as the nameless woman next to me in bed fell asleep.

As soon as it was morning, I went to a phone store and asked if there was any way I could get my photos back, which I could if I had the memory chip or something or other, which I didn't have. I doubted I could find it again at that bar I had left it in about a month or so ago, but I still called that bar anyways, thanking god that I'd saved the bar napkins with women's phone numbers on them. I was relieved to find the napkin of the bar I had crushed my phone at, called it through a sticky pay phone and inquiring if they had kept it for some reason.

Even though I expected the no, it still crushed me to hear it, and I hung up the phone feeling more defeated than ever.

But I couldn't bring myself to let go of the loss of it that night at yet another bar, so, I packed up and headed back for Texas. All the while, I dutifully avoided the real reason why.

I made it back to the small town a few days later, again inquiring at that bar, the guy who saw me crush my phone scoffing at me.

When they said they for sure didn't have the remains of my phone, I then asked where the trash went, and they gave me the street address of the dump, so I went there the next morning.

I asked the skinny lanky guy at the front office what they did with the trash and if they sorted it at all. He said they had, and pointed me to a room full of electronics being sorted for recycling, the twenty or so giant bins in there filled from top to bottom.

I paid the guy off for him not to touch anything for the day, and I spent the rest of the afternoon picking through every single phone, computer and various electronic pieces in the first two bins, but to no avail.

I came back everyday for the next week, sorting through everything, and the phones all started blurring together and looking the same.

When I got tired one night, I went back to the crappy motel room I was staying at, taking a shower as usual, but then I really looked at myself in the mirror for the first time since I'd left the bunker. I looked so tired and haggard. I had purplish bags under my bloodshot eyes, and my face was puffy and sallow from all the drinking, and that wasn't even all. The rest of my body looked as soft and as slack as my face, and definitely unhealthy. I was starting to look like one of those atypical deadbeat dads in movies; lazy, thick waists, a body looking as tired and as angry as the eyes it housed.

*If Cas saw me now...*

Hastily averting my eyes, I turned away from the mirror, flicking off the light and going to bed. After paying off the usual guy the next morning, I went through the last electronics bin, my heart sinking with every wrong phone I found.

I was getting tired and close to giving up ten minutes before closing time when I pulled out a broken computer, something caught in its wiring falling to the bottom of the bin.

Sighing, I grabbed the phone that had fallen, about to toss it when the half ripped off orange sticker caught my attention.

_The orange sticker Rayne put on my phone so we could tell our phones apart since we had the same phone._
My hands shaking, I turned the phone over, finding the Z shaped crack in the right hand corner that I'd gotten from narrowing avoiding a werewolf scratching my heart out. I'm pretty sure I damn near gave the nerdy kid at the front desk a heart attack when I freaked out. Rushing to the nearest phone store, I asked them to transfer my things on my phone to a memory stick, which they did within the hour. They said they weren't able to salvage everything, but that I should've gotten most of it, and I said it was good enough. I rushed back to my motel room after grabbing a burger, the giddiness wearing off into worry.

What if the very pictures and videos I wanted to save were the ones that they couldn't save?

My hands shaking slightly, my stomach black with worry and burger forgotten, I put the memory stick in my laptop, opening the file. I hastily scrolled through the couple of personal pictures I had before that, my stomach twisting as they didn't show up, until they finally did. Cas' euphoric filled face was there, the pictures he had taken of me after, the video, and all the pictures he had taken of us in the car. My chest ached the most though at the picture of the two of us smiling, our faces pressed together when we had stopped at that stoplight at god knows where anymore.

The happiness continued to ebb away, and the pain slowly replaced itself, coming back full force when I scrolled onto a picture of us kissing, a picture I hadn't known Cas had taken up until now. We looked so happy, the two of us sitting in the impala at yet another stoplight, the late afternoon sun making our faces glow. Cas looked very serious about the kiss, brows furrowed, probably trying to concentrate on kissing me and taking the picture, but there was a minutiae smile on his lips. And me... I looked nothing like I did now.

My jawline was sharp and angular with a slight scattering of scruff, not puffy and covered with an unruly beard I didn't bother shaving anymore. Although you could only see the side of my face, you could still tell how much healthier I had been then, but what hurt the most was the smile on my lips as they were pressed to Cas', forever happy in a moment I could never get back. I slammed the lid of my computer shut, about to toss it across the room, but I stopped myself, leaving it be, because I sure at hell didn't want to have to go through what I had the past week.

So, I did what I always did now. I grabbed my jacket, picked up my keys, and drove to the nearest bar.

I drank until the bar I had stopped at refused to serve me any more, so I staggered my way to the grocery store across the street, buying a six pack and carrying it outside. I tried making it back to my car, but I was too tired, settling for sitting in the alley between the grocery store and some other place of a name I couldn't read.

My heartbeat felt exceptionally slow as I drank my way through the second beer in the pack. I absently wondered if I was dying, and I laughed at the thought.

Man, after all my cocky bluster saying I would die at the edge of a blade or bite of a bullet, I was going to die by the one drink that got Cas and I our first kiss. Oh the irony.

The next span of time felt like a black, hazy blur, and I was content, happy, even. I was numb in every way, numb and stupid, not even caring that something about me felt off, wrong. I think I might've vomited a few times, but I couldn't say. All I knew was that I was cold, and tired, so tired. I felt my body sag to the ground, to something rough and cold, and I tried remembering what it felt like to be warm, but I no longer could. I didn't realize I wasn't breathing until a set of hands were pushing air back into my lungs.
Woo, sorry that chapter took so long. been kinda struggling with inspiration lately. Hope you guys enjoyed though, and sorry that chapter was so short...
I inhaled sharply, greedily sucking air into my lungs. My head was pounding in every way possible, almost as if something inside my head was using my temples as a drum. My mouth was bone dry, and my body as heavy as an anchor in the stiff bed I lay in. It was difficult waking up, and in a sense, it was almost like I was between death and life.

"Hey, are you awake?"

I squinted my eyes, forcing them to open, but the ultra bright light sent waves of agony through my eyes, so I shut them again.

"W-water..." I croaked hoarsely, still trying to get my bearings.

I felt a cold glass being pressed to my lips a moment later, and I drank the water, feeling every bit of its ice cold descent down my throat, and it was holy.

"Okay, I think that's enough for now," the soft voice that sounded familiar said after I drained the cup. "I really don't want you puking all the stuff they're pumping into you."

"Where am I?" I groaned, trying to rub my eyes, but a pricking in my arm stopped me. I blinked, my vision slowly clearing as I ignored the burning pain in my eyes from the light.

"God, you're messed up. You're in Heights General Hospital. Do you remember anything?"

"I remember Céline Dion makes my ears bleed- Claire?" I started to realize that Claire was siting in the chair next to my hospital bed, staring at me like I was moronic.

"No, it's Patrick." She rolled her eyes sardonically.

"Well, you know that talking to strangers isn't safe?" I grumbled, looking at all the IV cords connected to my arms and at the white blanket draped over me, one very much like those white cloths police used to cover dead bodies. "What're you doing here anyway?"

"Watching out for you after saving your lame ass." She shook her head. "What the hell were you thinking, Dean?"

"What's with the language?" I sighed wearily, feeling like I could barely move with all the wires taped to my skin.

"What's with you being an idiot?"

"Oh come on," I exclaimed, throwing her an exasperated glare. "Stop, I'm a grown ass man-"

"Who can do what he wants'. Blah, blah- got a better excuse?"
I sighed, shifting in an attempt to get more comfortable.

"How'd you find me?"

"I was on my way back to my motel room when I found you passed out in an alleyway dying of alcohol poisoning." Claire spat out the last few words, glaring irascibly at me. "Were you trying to get yourself killed?!"

I looked away, trying to wrap my mind around the fact, but I couldn't. I couldn't even remember the night before.

"I'm fine." I muttered, crossing my arms.

"Really? They're signing you up for rehab, Dean. That's a big deal. Or are you just that dumb you don't care anymore?"

I swallowed thickly, the pitied anger and belligerence in Claire's blue eyes making me think of another's that mirrored hers perfectly.

"I am "making a big deal" of this," I remembered hearing the quotations in his voice as he pinned me to the wall, glaring daggers at me, blue eyes furious. "Because for some unbeknownst reason to me, I love you, and I will not allow you to believe that you mean nothing."

"How long have I been here?" I ignored her demand, looking away to try and distract myself from the bitter memories.

"About a day."

"Awesome..." I muttered, glancing around the bland room then back at all the IV's snaking around my body like vines. I tugged at the tape that held the IV needle to my skin, wanting if off so I could get the hell out of here.

"Hey, no." Claire swatted my hand away, wincing slightly as I gasped in slight pain when she whacked the impressive bruise on my arm. "You're not going anywhere until you talk to Sam."

"No, I'm not talking to Sam," I said quickly, internally calculating how long I had until Sam and undoubtedly he got here. "I gotta go."

"Dean, you can't go yet," Claire was looking at me when I looked over at her. "You got rehab, remember?"

"I'm not going to no damn rehab..." I muttered, scowling.

"Well, tell the doctors that," she shrugged, looking over as a man opened the door and entered the room, clipboard in his hand.

"Dean, I'm glad you're awake," the hazel blonde said, nodding to Claire as he closed the door behind him. "How are you feeling?"

"Like Swayze just taught a girl to dance," I grumbled, wanting nothing more than to leave that damn hospital faster than a bat out of hell, but the agonizing pulsing in my head and the heavy grogginess slightly warping my senses would be a bitch to overcome.

The doctor chuckled to my surprise, looking over something on his clipboard before looking up at me over the rim of his glasses.
"Well Dean, I'm doctor Wallace, but you can call me Caleb. I hope a formal introduction will be suitable, since you're a bit−" he gestured to all the wires taped to my skin, nodding before turning to the monitors beside my bed. "Yeah..."

I chuckled wryly, unable to help but kinda like the guy for his effort at humor.

"I'm going to get something to eat," Claire announced, standing up. "You'd better be here when I get back."

She jabbed her phone threateningly in my direction before leaving the room and I sighed.

"Do you have a history of leaving your daughter at hospitals?" Caleb chuckled, writing on his clipboard, the pen scraping across the paper.

"More like her leaving when you least expect it," I sighed, absently wondering if Claire and I did look alike, or she had just said I was her father when she brought me in.

"I see," Caleb clicked his pen, tucking it in the pocket of his coat. "So, you know all the details of why you're here?"

"Since I can't seem to find a newspaper to read the headlines to fill me in, why don't you tell me."

Caleb chuckled wryly, sitting in the chair Claire had vacated, resting his chin on his fists and sobering.

"You're in here because you were experiencing alcohol poisoning. You're being enrolled in rehab, and it'll take some time for things to work themselves out in your body. I highly suggest you improve your diet and quit drinking as well."

**Overdose? Rehab? Eat healthy? No more beer? What kind of a fucking nightmare was this?**

"If it weren't for your daughter," Caleb continued, gazing empathically at me, a tinge of pity in his eyes as I tried to work through the haze in my mind. "It would've been too late for you. You're lucky to be alive."

I swallowed thickly, trying not to acknowledge what he was saying.

"Well, thanks doc, but I won't need rehab."

"I think you do." He sighed, lowering his hands from his chin. "From what the tests we ran said, it's a wonder you hadn't gotten alcohol poisoning sooner."

I nodded weakly, suddenly noticing the pain in my left eye as I became more coherent.

"Do I have a black eye?"

"Yeah," Caleb looked over at me, his eyebrow raised. "How'd you know?"

"Never mind. How'd I get it?"

"I don't know. You might've hit something." He mused, reading over some papers on a clipboard he grabbed, writing something down. "Do you have any other immediate family you'd like us to call for you, Dean?"

I heaved a breath, Cas' face skittering across my vision, along with Sam's.
"Your work is cut out for you already, doc."

Caleb shot me a puzzled look, but said nothing, putting the clipboard back on the footboard of my bed.

"I'd like to keep you here overnight for observation."

"Fine." I sighed, though it was the last thing I wanted to do as I assessed the wires and IV's taped to my arms.

"I'd stay put, Dean." I looked back over at Caleb, who was placidly checking the monitors at my bedside. "You're in no shape to try escaping. My desk is right there," he pointed to the desk a petite nurse was filing papers at. "I'll be sure to catch you if you try ducking out on me, not to mention I'm sure your daughter will make sure you don't."

"Sure thing doc," I said, and I couldn't help but smile a little, his stubborn nature striking a cord in me.

"Just take a nap or watch some TV." Caleb handed me the TV remote after turning the TV on, Wile E. Coyote and the Roadrunner chasing each other on screen. "I'll check up on you later."

I nodded, Caleb leaving soon after he put on his white doctory lab coat that he had hung over the back of the chair he had been sitting in. He then left the room, closing the door behind him and leaving me in semi-quiet.

I watched cartoons for a while, Claire coming back at one point to watch tv with me, but left soon after to go take care of her motel room and get the Impala. I must've fell asleep afterwards at some point, waking up to find a hazel haired man fiddling with the IV's on my arms.

"Who are you?" I asked, jerking away and hissing at the throb of pain my body gave me in response.

"I'm Caleb. We met earlier, but you don't remember. Memory lapses are a side effect of alcohol poisoning, but they'll stop happening after a few days."

"Son of a bitch.." I muttered, realizing I could've killed myself, and Caleb chuckled wryly.

"Don't worry, your memory will come back to you. We just have to keep you hydrated while your liver works out the alcohol. Are you hungry?"

My stomach twisted at the thought of eating, and I winced.

"Doesn't sound like such a good idea, doc."

"That's fine. Just as long as you stay hydrated. Don't pull out those IV's." He added when I tugged at the IV needle in my left arm.

I sighed, giving up, looking over at the window, the sky black.

"Dean?"

"Hmm." I muttered, about to ask how he knew my name, but then I remembered him mentioning that we had met earlier, so I didn't bother.

"Would you mind telling me why you were drinking?"

"Why is it your business?"
"Gotta fill out your papers for rehab."

"I'm not going to rehab."

"I think you should, Dean."

"What are you, my mother?"

Caleb sighed, and I saw him sit in the chair next to my bed, clipboard in hand.

"Fine, how about we just talk then?"

"Why?"

"So I can get to know you. If you don't think you need rehab, then you'll have to prove it to me."

"I didn't sign up for therapy."

"It's either this, or rehab, Dean."

I sighed, rolling my eyes up at the ceiling.

"Fine. What do you wanna know?"

"It would be helpful if you told me your last name."

"You aren't writing our names down on a marriage license, are you?"

"Dean."

"Winchester." I sighed, wishing I could rub my face. "My name is Dean Winchester."

"No middle name?"

"What's the point of one?"

"I agree there," Caleb chuckled, writing on the paper from his clipboard, pushing his black glasses up his nose. "Much more work and letters to write in on a tiny line."

"Gives doctors a chance to practice on their crappy handwriting though."

Caleb paused, holding up his clipboard in my view, my name printed across the top of the paper in neat, block print writing.

"I stand corrected," I said in admiration, Caleb smirking down at his paper slightly as he continued filling it in. "You're the first doctor I've met with good handwriting."

"So you've encountered a lot?"

"Kind of the norm when you have an idiot younger brother that jumps off sheds thinking he's Superman."

Caleb looked up at me over the rim of his glasses.

"So, you have a brother?"

"Younger. His name is Sam."
"Sounds like you care a lot about Sam," Caleb mused, writing more on the paper.

"He's the only family I got."

"What about your daughter, Claire?"

I blanked for a second, but I went with it, trying to remember why Claire was factoring into this.

"Well, outside her, of course."

"And her mother?"

I knew Cas was far from being a mother in any way, not even currently the right gender for that, not to mention in the body of Claire's real father, but I instantly thought of him nonetheless.

Cas...

"Walked out." I took a breath, looking out the window again, trying to ignore the tightness in my chest.

"You two get in a fight?"

"Something like that."

"Well," Caleb clicked his pen, putting aside his clipboard. "Maybe one day you two can sort things out."

*I doubt that'll ever happen doc..."

"No. Things are better this way."

"If you say so," Caleb took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes.

"Rough day, doc?" I asked as I looked back over at him.

"No more than usual. It always makes me happy to see a patient recovering though." He smiled at me, the faint etching of twin dimples appearing at the edges of his mouth.

"I bet your girlfriend is happy to have a real life Superman."

He laughed, giving me a quizzical look.

"What makes you think I have a girlfriend?"

"I dunno," I shrugged, flustered. "You just strike me as the guy who had all the social norms covered."

He laughed again, the sound warm and nice in the quiet sterol buzz of the hospital.

"I'm afraid I can't deliver on the perfect doctor life you think I have; I'm here more than I am at home."

"Not even close to Dr. Sexy?" I teased.

"I think you're the first guy who's ever mentioned him to me." Caleb chuckled. "I hear the women talk about him and that show a lot; is it good?"
"I don't watch it."

He gave me a dubious look, and I rolled my eyes.

"There was nothing else on today."

"Uh-huh," Caleb said disbelievingly, taking his papers out of his clipboard. "I think you should rest, Mr. Winchester."

"Don't get all formal on me now," I rolled my eyes.

"Alright, Dean." He corrected himself. "I'm going to make my rounds. You had better be here in the morning."

"I'm not making any promises."

"Remember," he pointed to the desk across the halfway, giving me the, I'm-watching-you gesture with his fingers, and I chuckled.

"Got it."

He smiled at me, nodding before leaving.

________________________

I slept all through the night soundly, not bothering on trying to leave. Besides, where would I go anyway?

After refreshing me on who he was the next morning, Caleb asked me the usual how I was feeling and all that. Claire came back in later that morning and helped me eat a few saltine crackers, but I gave up on that with the wicked twisting in my stomach, so she distracted me with talking.

She filled me in with what had been happening the last four years since I'd last seen her, and it was hard to believe that she was now twenty-two, but she was.

She told me how she went to see Jody from time to time, who was still working as a cop and helping out hunters in any way that she could. Alex still lived with her, working as a waitress and going to the community college to become a nurse. Claire told me that she moved back in with Jody when she had nowhere else to go, promising Jody a shot at a normal life. Claire had gotten a job at a record shop, took a few community college classes, but she told me that she just couldn't do it. She couldn't stand the monotony of normal life, could never really fit in anywhere seemingly. The thing that hurt her the most though, living with Jody, was reading all the news articles about obvious monsters on the hunt, but never doing anything because she had a normal life to maintain. She couldn't leave at the drop of a hat, and I could tell the free spirit in Claire lamented in that. So, she decided to just follow what felt right, and after quitting her classes and job, she went on the road again. Now, a year later, she had just finished up her latest hunt when she stumbled across me, which is where we stood now.

"I missed you, even though you're an old skeezer." She grinned, laughing as I scoffed at her.

"Forty-one is not that old. I'm still gettin' laid." I scoffed, rolling my eyes and she balked.

"Oh, god, I so don't want to know that, dad." She shuddered, and I rolled my eyes.

"Whatever. I hope you're being smart though." I scrutinized her and she rolled her eyes.

"There is no one in my life like that, Dean."
"That's not entirely what I meant."

She scowled at me, and I met her gaze levelly, shrugging.

"I just don't want you getting involved with the wrong people, Claire."

"Don't worry about that," she sighed, shifting in the chair to sit cross legged. "So what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Sam told me. About Castiel."

I swallowed, looking away out the window again.

"Then there's nothing to say."

"Is that why you're in here? Trying to cope?"

"Claire," I warned her.

She sighed, a soft sound, silence filling the room.

"I'm sorry."

I swallowed, glancing over at her, those blue eyes that I knew so well on a different face.

*You and me both kid, you and me both...*

We both jumped as the door opened, Caleb walking into the room.

"I'll leave you guys to it then," Claire said, abruptly rushing out of the room and shutting the door a little harder than necessary, Caleb raising his eyebrow at that in response.

"Everything alright?" He queried, pulling out his pen.

"Typical father-daughter stuff," I cleared my throat, shifting in the bed. "Let's talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know, anything."

"Well, uh, I'm forty-three, I like classic rock, I have a green guppy fish named Bart."

*Bart?" I interrupted, bursting out laughing, and Caleb seemed to blush.

"Yeah, I know, it's a terrible name..."

"Why Bart?"

"It's what I came up with at the time," he shrugged, though he seemed unable to meet my gaze again. "So, what are your plans after you get out?"

"No rehab?" I grinned hopefully.

"Well, from your records, you've never been in the hospital or any place for alcoholism before. I think you'll be fine. Just don't let it happen again, Dean."
"Scouts honor."

He chuckled, folding up his glasses and putting them in his pocket.

"So? What will you do?"

"I don't know," I sighed, scratching my arm gingerly. "Probably just drive."

"Where?"

"Anywhere."

"Don't you live here? Have work?"

"I'm a nomad."

"Ah, I see." Caleb nodded, rubbing his chin with a brooding expression. "Well, I have an extra room at my place if you'd like to crash there."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"Just a suggestion. Someplace to be until you get settled or figure out what you want. I often offer it to my patients who just need a little help getting back onto their feet." He raised his hands. "Don't feel pressured to say yes, just know the option is open to you."

"Wow, uh, thanks.." I said awkwardly.

"Mr. Winchester? You have a visitor."

Caleb and I looked up, the petite nurse that worked at Caleb's desk standing next to Sam.

"Sam..." I said slowly, a burst of warmth filling my chest at seeing my brother.

"Hi Dean." He said, a small smile on his face, though I could see that tenseness in his shoulders.

Great.

"Hello Sam," Caleb stood up, shaking Sam's hand. "I'm Dr. Wallace, but you can call me Caleb. I'm the one who has been caring for him, I've heard a bit about you."

"Nice to meet you, and thank you for that." Sam said earnestly, vigorously returning his handshake.

"Not a problem, I'll leave you two to talk." Caleb glanced over at me before softly closing the door behind him, leaving Sam and I alone, the soft humming of the dumb soap opera playing softly on the TV the only thing breaking the tense silence.

"What the hell, Dean." Sam finally growled, glaring angrily at me.

I sighed.

"Sam-"

"You almost died Dean, what the hell were you thinking?!"

"Not at all apparently."
Sam sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose before throwing up his hands.

"We've been looking for you for almost two months, only for Claire to call us and tell us that you're in a hospital for alcohol poisoning." Sam spat the words, like they left a fowl taste in his mouth. "Dean, do you not see how serious that is?!"

"Apparently not."

"What happened to you?" Sam gazed pitifully at me, eyes wide in hurt and frustration.

Heartbreak.

"Life," I answered simply, the same thing hippie Cas had told me back when Zack had thrown me into The Walking Dead 2.0.

Sam sighed, sitting heavily in the chair Caleb had vacated.

"Do you realize what you've done?"

"If you're here just to guilt trip me, then leave."

"Dean, you just left. Do you not see how incredibly selfish that was? Not to mention hard on all of us? We were all worried sick about you, not knowing where you were, thinking something bad happened to you when your phone number was disconnected. All that on top of worrying about everything else with Cas."

My chest ached at Cas' name, and I looked away.

"Yeah, I bet Cas was real worried about me." I rolled my eyes. "Where is he and everyone else?"

"In the waiting room." Sam explained. "I just wanted to talk to you first."

"Yeah, well, I'm alive."

Sam sighed in aggravation, brushing back his shoulder length hair, a small silence falling over us.

"You need a haircut." I finally remarked.

"You need to shave." Sam retorted, a slight smile on his face. "You look like a cave man."

"A sexy caveman."

"Funny." Sam rolled his eyes, standing up. "I'll go tell the others you're okay."

"I'll be here."

"You better."

I waved him off, Sam leaving and closing the door behind him.

I was getting weary when no one came back to my room fifteen minutes later, my eyes sliding shut. I gave up on waiting for someone to come back, hoping it had all been some lucid dream. God knew I didn't want to see him.

On the verge of falling asleep twenty minutes later, the door softly opened and I opened my eyes, Cas stepping inside the room.
"Cas..." I whispered, my heart instantly racing in my chest as he closed the door behind him.

"Hello, Dean." He said softly, standing at the edge of my bed, his critical, look-at-this-idiot gaze roving over me, but it looked like there was a tinge of pity in them.

Or maybe I was just being hopelessly optimistic.

"What do you want." I hardened myself, hating how my heart was racing just looking at him.

"How are you?"

"How do you think."

He said nothing, a thick silence settling over us before he awkwardly moved to sit in the chair besides my bed. I noticed he finally lost the Thor hair, his hair back to its usual bed-head wild mess, and my chest ached seeing it, because now he looked exactly as Cas had before I lost him to The Empty.

"I'm sorry," he said finally.

"Take your damn apologies to a Confessional."

He sighed, looking up at me.

"I really am sorry, Dean."

"Yeah, well, it's done with. There's the door."

He frowned at me, head tilting.

"I'm not done telling you what I have to say."

"Does it look like I care?" I snapped, trying to ignore the rising hysteria in my chest, the feeling I had drunk away these last almost two months. "Get out! I don't want to see you!"

He looked slightly surprised, something else flicking through his eyes, but I looked away before I could identify it.

"Dean-"

"Get. Out." I hissed, my throat tight.

There was a small silence, quiet enough that I could hear the breaths I used to count. I finally heard the chair sigh as he got up, leaving the room and closing the door behind him without a word. I exhaled the breath I didn't know I had been holding, a hot tear sliding down my face, tickling my skin as it followed the curvature of my nose as I stared out of the little window, the tree branches outside it swaying in the wind.

________________

I must've fell asleep again at some point, waking up again to the soft sounds of Caleb checking my IV's and monitors.

"What's up, doc?" I stretched - with what little leeway I was given to stretch.
"Hi, Dean. How you feeling?"

"Fine." I answered truthfully.

"Good. Your vitals and everything look great. You could leave now if you wanted to."

"Awesome," I sighed, though for once hearing this, I wasn't excited.

"Everything alright?"

"Is that offer of a empty guest room still open?"

I saw Caleb scrutinize me out of the corner of my eyes, but I pretended to ignore him.

"Of course. Everything okay with your family? They seem like a nice bunch."

"Things are fine." I winced as I sat up, my body sore and stiff from bed rest. "Let's go now."

"My shift is over in twenty minutes, and you need to sign your leave still and probably consult with your family."

"Sounds good. Gimme the documents and I'll give you my John Hancock." I stretched my body slightly, listening to my muscles pop.

"Alright Patriot, give me a couple minutes and I'll set you up with that." Caleb stepped over to me, carefully pulling out all my IV's, removing all the tiny wires that restrained my movement. "Stretch if you'd like, but take it easy. Bathroom is right around the corner if you need it."

"Thanks," I watched him leave, signing a couple more things on his paper as I flexed my stiff fingers.

I pushed my blankets back, gingerly putting my legs over the side of the bed before I realized I was wearing one of those stupid hospital gowns that did nothing to cover your backside. Sighing, I pushed myself to my feet, gathering my bearings for a moment. Once I was sure I wasn't going to topple over, I walked up to my room door, shutting it. Claire had gone back for my things and the Impala the other night, leaving some fresh clothes for me when she had returned. Changing into the clothes Claire had left me, and making sure I was presentable, I laid the hospital gown on the bed, jumping when there was a knock on my door. When I granted the person knocking permission, the blonde, petite nurse who worked with Caleb came in, pen and clipboard in hand, pointing out the things I needed to fill in. I was filling in the last thing when Sam walked in.

"Dean? What are you doing?"

"Getting out of here." I muttered, handing the nurse the clipboard and pen, Sam stepping aside to let her leave the room.

"And going where?"

"That's none of your concern."

That's a load of crap, Dean, and you know it. No, you're coming back home."

"I'm not going back home, Sam!" I hissed irascibly. "It's not even my home anymore."

Sam rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he crossed his arms.
"You sound like a child, you know that? I don't care what happened between you and Cas - I'm sorry things are bad - but you need to get over it. And if all you're doing is getting drunk and nearly overdosing on your own, there's no way in hell I'm letting you leave by yourself. Dad may not have told me to look after you like he told you to look after me, but don't think for a second I won't look out for you. I'm saying you're coming back home, and that's final. I'll check things out with the nurse, and don't even think about running out either." Sam glared at me, opening the hospital room door and shutting it behind him with a slam.

I sighed, wearily sinking back on the hospital bed, rubbing my face.

Turning to the side, I grabbed the pen and pad of paper on the table next to the bed, scribbling an apology note to Caleb for changing my mind. I had just been in the process of finishing the note, when the room door opened and I looked up to see Caleb walking in, closing the door behind him.

"My shift is over, if you're ready to leave."

"Yeah... Um, about that-

I broke off as the door opened again, Cas stepping into the room and looking between me and Caleb, before looking back over at me suspiciously.

"We're ready to go, Dean." Cas reported, meeting my gaze levelly.

"Oh, so you changed your mind?" Caleb looked back over at me, though he didn't seem upset.

"Sorry about that, doc." I shrugged sheepishly, but he merely smiled a little, waving it off.

"Don't worry about that, though, may I ask you something, Dean?"

"What's up?" I didn't miss the way Cas turned to look at me to see my response.

"I acknowledge that this is out of line, and you may not even regard me in that way," I watched curiously as he pulled a pad of paper out, along with his white and blue pen. "But I was wondering if you would like to exchange phone numbers and possibly set up dinner?"

"Oh..." I was surprised, not entirely sure how to even respond when Cas butted in.

"He doesn't have a phone."

"But I plan to get a new one," I quickly added, trying not to smirk when Cas' head whipped over in my direction at that. "I'd consider dinner."

"Really?" Caleb smiled, and I did too. "Well, would you just like me to give you my number and then you could text me once you get your phone?"

"That sounds perfect," I agreed, taking care to not look over in Cas' direction again.

"Fantastic," Caleb murmured, scribbling out his phone number on the pad of paper before tearing it off the pad and handing it to me. "I'll be waiting for your call, Dean."

"Call you in a few," I took the paper with his phone number when he handed it to me, stuffing it my back pocket with a wink.

"Goodbye, Dean." Caleb smiled warmly at me, nodding farewell to me before turning to his clipboard, and I turned and walked around Cas and out of the room.
I didn't bother waiting for him, just made my way down the hallway towards the elevators when Cas spoke.

"What was that?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean."

"Why, what's it to you?" I challenged him, finding the elevators and pushing the button, it instantly turning a pallid yellow.

I looked over at him when he said nothing, and he refused to meet my gaze.

"What, cat got your tongue?"

"What cat?" Cas responded irritably, and my chest twisted as how so very pre-Empty Cas that was.

"Never mind," I said muttered, clearing my throat and stepping inside the elevator after this girl wheeled an older man out in a wheelchair.

Silence reigned supreme as the elevator doors slipped shut after Cas stepped inside, and I was quick to press the first floor button, the elevator jerking into motion.

"You didn't answer my question."

"Yeah, well, you didn't answer mine." I retorted, rolling my eyes as I crossed my arms.

"I don't have to respond to that."

"No, you don't," I acquiesced. "But I wish you would."

He opened his mouth to retort, but quickly shut it, and I laughed mirthlessly, nodding to myself.

"Yeah, that's what I thought."

The elevator stopped on the seventh floor, opening to a woman who quickly apologized for changing her mind, and I sighed as I listened to her thick red high heels clack away.

"Dean-"

"I'll just take the stairs..." I muttered, in no mood whatsoever to speak to Cas, and I stopped the elevator doors from closing with my hand, completely and wholly unprepared for the hand on my shoulder to suddenly yank me back into the elevator, slamming me to the wall, and I grunted as the air was forced out of my lungs from the impact.

"Jeez... Can't a guy work on leg day..." I grumbled as I caught my breath, swallowing thickly to see blue eyes blazing in belligerence at me, Cas' hand still pinning me to the wall.

I abruptly felt like the air was ripped from my lungs again, along with my stomach ripping out, as the wild anger that burned in Cas' eyes reminded me of that day I had nearly died when we went searching for his Grace at the sanitarium Nira and her posse and I had camped out at for that year.

The way he had been furious that I was so indifferent about death.

I saw that same angry flame in his eyes now, and I couldn't breathe, seeing the old Cas hovering in
the new Cas like a malevolent ghost.

*It was like deja vu...*

"Damn it, Dean, would you let me say what I have to say?" He demanded, though the fierceness left him, and now new Cas was back in full swing as he let go of my shoulder and took subjugate steps back, that familiar shyness sweeping over him again.

"I don't care about what you have to say." I growled, the elevator doors closing as I closed myself off to him.

"I'm sorry about what I said."

"What time." I remarked callously, crossing my arms and looking at the fake wood walls of the elevator; *anywhere* but him.

He sighed, and I risked a glance at him, his lips in a thin line as he stared up at the ceiling, as if he was trying to find some kind of divine intervention of patience. I found it kinda funny, but it hurt, because I knew that look well. It was that look I received when I wasn't listening to what he was saying, or when I didn't agree with his 'right' opinion.

I never knew I would find a bittersweet comfort in that emotional quirk of his now.

*I never knew it would make me want to kiss him...*

I swallowed thickly, trying to stay on track, find that emotional distance from him that I had gained while I had aimlessly stumbled into bar after bar these last two months, but I couldn't. It was if all the progress I had made in hating and forgetting him these last two months, crumbled to dust. In his presence, I was stripped of my emotional armor and laid naked, bare and defenseless, and I was at a complete loss, not knowing how to fight, how to cope.

I didn't know what to defend myself with since I had never had to defend myself from feelings like these before...

"I'm sorry about what I said the night you left," Cas clarified now, and I quickly looked away when he looked back at me. "I've gotten some clarity since then."

"Oh, so you took a ride on some DMT trip and now have seen the light. Would you like a gold star?"

He scowled at me, and I could see the muscles working in his jaw when I looked at him.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I was wrong."

"Ah, don't you feel so much better? In fact, I think I just lost about ten pounds from that being lifted off of me." I smiled sardonically at him, internally swearing in relief when the elevator stopped on the first floor, the doors opening.

"Dean, I'm sorry."

I wanted to retort, say some other snarky, sarcastic response, but when I glanced over at him, I saw a brief glimpse of the sincere guilt on his face, and it caught me off guard, so I said nothing.

I was still scrambling through my brain for a reply, when the air was smashed out of my lungs yet again when someone slammed into me in a football tackle of a hug.
"God damn it, Dean!" I choked for air, barely able to register the telltale royal purple curly hair before I recognized the voice. "Are you crazy?!"

"Nice to see you too, Rayne." I huffed, leaning back to look down at her, hazel-blue eyes boring into mine.

"I swear, I'll kill you for this." She threatened, jabbing a finger up at me.

"I sure hope you'll miss me after," I muttered, hugging Jazz when she came over to me.

"You okay?" She asked softly as she hugged me.

"I've been worse," I assured her, smiling weakly at her as we pulled away, and I knew she understood in that bodily psychic way of hers.

"Claire is already heading for the bunker," Sam informed me as he walked over to me, the five of us walking out of the hospital. "We already have your things packed in the impala, and if we hustle, we could be back at the bunker by midnight."

"Awesome." I said the most knee-jerk response, but a part of me was happy to go home. Albeit a small part.

"Cas, you up for driving?" Sam asked him as I walked with the four of them towards the impala and Sam's red pickup truck towards the back of the parking lot.

"Yes," Cas affirmed, his hands in his hoodie pockets, the same hoodie he seemed to enjoying wearing when he was human. Old Cas, at least.

"Alright," Sam said, digging in his coat pocket. "Just follow us, and if you get lost, you know how to call us."

Sam tossed Cas a set of keys, and I nearly didn't think anything of it, until saw that treasured tiny pie keychain on it.

"Oh you've got to be kidding." I exclaimed, Cas and Sam both looking over at me in unison. "He is not driving."

"There was barely room for him in my truck on the way here, and you probably shouldn't drive yet, so deal with it." Sam said indifferently, unlocking the passenger door to his truck and letting Rayne and Jazz inside it before closing the door. "Cas can drive just fine, there's no need for you to worry. Plus," he walked back over to me, lowering his voice as Cas unlocked the Impala. "You guys need to work your crap out. This thing you guys have going on is stupid, and I'm tired of it."

"I'm going to kill you." I hissed, and Sam smiled a shit-eating grin at me as he walked around me.

"Love you too, jerk."

"Bitch." I muttered as Sam got into his truck, the impala engine flaring to life milliseconds after.

Grumbling various curses and profanities to myself, I walked around Sam's truck to the passenger door of the impala, opening the door and getting into the impala with a huff, shutting the door a little harder than necessary.

"Dean-"
"Don't say a word to me." I snapped, turning on the radio, forgetting that I hadn't used it since that night with Gerald, and immediately Angel by Aerosmith began blaring through the speakers.

-I don't know if I can face the night
I'm in tears and the cryin' that I do is for you
I want your love - Let's break the walls between us
Don't make it tough - I'll put away my pride
Enough's enough, I've suffered and I've seen the light

I internally swore, a strong part of me wanting to shut off the radio, but with the imminent promise that Cas would want to talk, it kept me from doing so.

Sit and suffer, awesome...

I was reminded why I didn't listen to music anymore after the Gerald thing; just too many memories and feelings that I didn't want to deal with or remember.

I couldn't see how things could get much worse, being stuck in a car listening to the song that I once associated solely to Cas, with said ex there and driving my fucking car out of the hospital parking lot following my dick brother in his stupid pickup truck.

I honestly debated on jumping out of the moving car and making a run for it, but I'd probably only end up the hospital again with a much angrier brother and having to start over. It was like playing a stupid video game that you couldn't for the life of you figure out how to get to the next level.

Son of a bitch...

Don't know what I'm gonna do
About this feeling inside
Yes it's true - Loneliness took me for a ride
Without your love - I'm nothing but a beggar
Without your love - a dog without a bone
What can I do, I'm sleeping in this bed alone

I hate this song, I hate this song, I hate this song... I thought repeatedly to myself, but despite the
vehemence I tried to give myself about it, I couldn't do it.

All I could remember was how I had felt before listening to this song, how it would bring a smile to my face.

I remembered one afternoon of it playing while Cas and I were pulled over to the side of the road, waiting out that really bad thunderstorm on our way to recovering his Grace. How Cas and I had ended up wildly kissing and grabbing at each other as the rain pounded on the roof of the impala as Angel played.

"You're my angel, you know," I remembered saying to Cas between gulps of air, and despite how fucking mushy and dumb it was, I knew Cas didn't give a single damn. I knew he wouldn't see that as him 'changing' me or 'taming' me, like others in society would've. I knew he saw it exactly for what it was; me just saying what was on my mind for once in my damn life. Me just saying in my own way that I loved him.

I remembered how Cas just whimpered at that, tangling his fingers in my hair and pulling me closer as he kissed me like he was starving for it.

That was one of the many things I had loved about Cas, how he made everything seem like it was the first time, no matter how many times we kissed or how many times we did anything physical.

Cas had an insatiable passion for me, and I loved each and every second I would give him easing that bottomless well of love he harbored for me.

"I love you," I remembered him whispering to me as we pulled away for air, his eyes warm and sincere as he gazed up at me as I hovered over him, his fingers brushing my hair back.

"I know, Angel," I whispered, cradling his face with my left hand, rubbing my thumb across his cheek, feeling his stubble.

"But Dean, I'm not an angel, I'm human." He protested, shuddering as I kissed his neck.

"Cas, you've always been my angel, Grace, or no Grace." I assured him, nipping lightly at his earlobe and he pulled me closer to him.

"Dean-"

"Shh." I hushed him, knowing he wanted to retort to that as I kissed his lips softly. "Just... let me call you as you are."

I pulled back to look at him, and the sparkle in his eyes made my chest warm, as did his smile in response to that.

"Okay." He finally said softly, cupping the back of my head and pulling me in for a kiss again. "Tell me again, Dean."

"Now you're just taking advantage of it."

"Say it," he demanded, and I gasped when he playfully bit my bottom lip.

"You're a sneaky, demanding little angel," I grinned devilishly, kissing along his jawline, almost laughing at the exasperated sigh he gave at that.
"Dean..." He muttered, and I chuckled, kissing the edge of his mouth.

"You know how we should pass the time, Angel?" I questioned him, running my hand over his side to the edge of his shirt, smirking as he shuddered as I teased his bare skin with my fingers.

I remembered how Cas was more than receptive to that idea at first, but when push came to shove, Cas completely froze up on me and refused to go farther. I was more than confused and bothered sitting in the car shirtless as Cas scrambled to put his sweater back on.

At first, I thought Cas was scared of taking things farther than just the kissing and gentle fondling and caresses, but it completely crushed me to find out later that me sleeping with Nira had been the source of his discomfort.

Nira had been the source of nearly all the tumultuous changes in me and Cas' relationship. If I really wanted to be honest with myself, she was responsible for the ever rolling shitstorm that was me and Cas' relationship, coming to a stop.

Her spell she cast on me to find my deepest desire led to me and Cas' first kiss. Led to the truth coming out, the ever building storm to finally burst forth into rain. For all the feelings to burst free, all the pent up feelings and thoughts to flood forth. She was responsible for our entire relationship, but with that power, just as quickly as she had inadvertently made it, she had just as quickly destroyed it.

As much as I despised her and wanted to rip her to shreds still despite her oddly killing herself, I had some strange tiny sense of begrudging sense of admiration for her. The bitch had done the one thing no one else had been able to accomplish; find a weak spot of mine even more tender than loosing Sam since no one else had really ever bothered to bruise and abuse it. Now I fully understood why it was so hard for most superheroes to find love and keep those loves alive. Those people who you ended up loving with the most tender spot of your heart ended up becoming your heart. You might as well be cutting out that critical slice of your heart and handing it to that one person you couldn't stand not being there to make it beat. Even if they themselves actually accepted the gift of your heart and kept it safe in their care - in their own heart - you were still taking a risk.

What if they fell out of love with you?

What if something happened?

What if they were taken from you?

There were so many possibilities on what could happen, and if I still wanted to be honest with myself, it still hit me hard everyday that the one person who I was certain would never leave me, left me in the worst way possible.

And now I couldn't escape it no matter how hard I tried.

I hated how I felt. Hated how I loved Cas. Hated the power he held over me, hated how the one time I thought I had discovered something worthwhile, it had backfired on me in one of the worst ways possible.

But damn it, I wanted to know what was so good about love.

I wanted to know what gave Sam the power to fall over the edge so far, I couldn't even save him at some points. I wanted to know what Bobby's wife had meant when she had stared empathetically at me that one time in the kitchen, declaring with certainty that I had never been in love. I found myself wanting to know then, what she meant when she said as Bobby's partner, it was her job to bring him...
peace. I wanted to know what that woman, Mildred, meant when she told me to follow my heart. Sure, then I had been pining over Amara with that creepy ass emotional control she had over me, but I still took her advice to heart then. All the people I'd met who had given or demonstrated love to me in some form or another, always made me curious. I knew that a deep, buried and burned part of me wanted to know what it was like feeling these things. I had thought, for a brief moment, that maybe I had, for the first time with Cas.

And I had let myself do the deadly thing of believing that, and now, I was just as fractured and broken as all the poor sons of bitches who I'd witnessed getting the shitty end of love.

And it sucked ass.

The one thing I really wanted to know though, was how did they cope after that? I remembered that one woman who's husband thought he had killed Sam and turned into a werewolf. How she had been vehement about saying that nothing would ever be normal again since he was killed. Because she had lost the man that she loved.

Was she right, or was it just an overly dramatic outburst in the heat and confusion of grief?

It seemed, having been trying to learn how to live without Cas for over a year now, that nothing got much easier.

Sure, it was easier to deal with the pain now, because you knew of the hole in your chest and how to ignore it at times, but it never seemed to go away. All I could think of every free second I got, were god damn memories of Cas. Memories of when he told me that he loved me, how he found me beautiful.

I used to chastise myself for thoughts like these, feeling utterly pathetic and weak like some dumb girl in a romance movie that got her heart broken, but I eventually gave up. I had to give those atypical heartbroken girls in movies some credit, because they made heartbreak look like a piece of cake. I couldn't understand how they didn't have beer in hand to keep their thoughts off of stupid blue eyes and chocolate brown hair. Or god, how they would still go about their normal lives like nothing happened. How could they run around some school campus or whatever and not feel the need to just drive the fuck away and hunt something? How could they see the spot where they and said missing lover had first kissed or something or other without wanting to burn the spot to the ground just so you couldn't be reminded of that moment any more?

How did you handle this?

Of course like all important things, there was no blueprint or instruction manual on how to cope, and I was left thrashing in the waves in the middle of a hurricane struggling to learn how to swim.

Would I ever learn how to handle this?

Now though, as I had hoped, the music kept Cas from talking, and the memory inducing music was almost worth the pain that accompanied it.

Almost.

The wearily tense drive was tiring though, despite the fact that Cas and I were just sitting there with the music masking the tension. I'd never admit it, but Cas was a great driver, maybe a bit too slow, but he was smart, and I stopped worrying about him wrecking the impala, but I still wasn't happy with him driving.

I wasn't happy with being stuck in the car with him. I wasn't happy with him driving, and I wasn't
happy being smashed into him in a booth at a diner when everyone stopped for dinner. I wasn't happy with each attempt Cas made to talk to me each time conversation at the table lulled, or each time we stopped for gas. I wasn't happy when Claire's car had engine issues that I couldn't fix until the next morning when the auto part stores opened. And as if all that unhappiness wasn't enough, the fifth motel we pulled into was the only one in the entire city that even had rooms available due to some stupid boxing match going on the next day. The downside to that was there was only two rooms. One with two queen sized beds, and one with just one king sized bed. I came back from getting my water in the impala to be told by Sam that Cas and I got the room with the king.

I was beyond livid, and if I wasn't so tired and worn out from the long day of traveling and my weakened body, I would've kicked Sam's ass for stuffing me in a room with my ex with a single bed for the night.

So since I was too tired to fight hard enough to get myself out of the situation, I found myself in a motel room alone with Cas, my stupid brother sharing a bed with his girlfriend next door, while Claire and Rayne shared the other bed.

*Why couldn't I share a bed with anyone else... Anyone but Cas...*

I sighed, holding my bag of clothes and stared at the stupid single bed, glaring at its primly made sheets and pillows.

*Son of a bitch.*

*Why couldn't there be a couch at least so I could sleep on that?*

I jumped as the door opened, Cas coming in with his bag of clothes, and I hastily turned around and holed myself up in the bathroom, locking myself inside.

The shower was soothing on my cold skin and tense muscles, and I took my time with it. I took my time washing my hair and my body. I took my time drying off, brushing my teeth, and shaving. I ended up stalling, really, not wanting to come out and face Cas. I probably would've stayed in there all night if I wasn't so tired and barely awake, so I begrudgingly walked out of the bathroom after I finished doing everything I could to stall, Cas sitting on the bed and watching a documentary on bees. I made a show of putting my dirty clothes back in my bag, and Cas took his own bag and went to the bathroom.

I stared at the bed again as I listened to the shower start up again, and I sighed as I remembered how much Cas had enjoyed showers together. I missed it, the way he seemed to enjoy washing me off, and just enjoying giving me pleasant sensations and watching my reactions. I had hoped that one time maybe we could do more than just wash each other off in the shower, but I knew that wouldn't happen now.

I sighed as I finally gave into my weariness, pulling back the blankets to the bed and collapsing into it. I hummed to myself aloud at how blissfully comfortable that damn bed was, much more comfortable than that stupid hospital bed.

I suddenly remembered that Caleb had given me his number. That I had openly flirted with a guy in front of my ex as well.

God, what had happened to me? Why had I even agreed to Caleb's advancement?

I started dozing off as I halfheartedly pondered these questions, soothed by the sounds of Cas in the shower and the droning of the bee documentary program on the tv.
Cas in the shower.

Damn, I bet he looked good now.

A small part of me wanted to immediately reject these thoughts, having gone in the 'danger' zone, but now mostly asleep, I no longer had the strength to avoid the thoughts, nor did I want to.

I remembered what Cas looked like under the spray of the water, the paths the water took as it traveled in rivulets down his body. I remembered how hot his skin would be under my tongue as I would capture some of the water drops off of his skin with my tongue, or the way his hands would graze over my skin, making goosebumps follow each and every single time. I remembered the way my stomach would twist with desire each and every single time I looked at him. How god damn mouthwatering his body was. It was so damn unfair how he could make me want to slam him against a wall and kiss him senseless just by looking at me.

He was like a damn pie; something I couldn't get enough of once I got a taste.

Hmm... pie...

I started as a lock or something popped, and I blinked groggily, looking around to find the source of the thing bringing me back to awareness, and I froze to see Cas walking out of the bathroom shirtless, vigorously drying his hair with a towel.

He froze too looking over at me, and I should've looked away, but I couldn't, my eyes locked in his.

"Do you feel better?" Cas asked me, breaking eye contact as he put his towel on the edge of the bed, bending over to dig in his bag, and I blinked, clearing my throat.

"W-what?" I stammered uselessly as I tried to look anywhere but Cas' shapely ass in his sweatpants.

"Do you feel better?" Cas repeated, standing back up straight as he pulled the black t-shirt he had grabbed out of his suitcase right-side out. "I saw that you shaved."

"Um, yeah..." I said dumbly, reaching up to touch my smooth cheek to reaffirm to myself that I had shaved as I internally chastised myself for being excited that Cas had noticed that I had.

Who wouldn't notice, Dean. I thought cynically to myself. That shit was long enough to make Rapunzel jealous...

"Good," Cas said now as I sighed, pulling the black t-shirt over his head much to my disappointment. "Would you like the tv on?"

"Uh, no." I said, watching his every movement as he turned off the tv and checked that the room door was locked, before turning off the lamp next to the other side of the bed, though he left the bathroom light on.

I was falling back asleep as I watched him do this, but I woke right back up when Cas pulled back the bedsheets, preparing to get into the bed next to me.

"Oh hell no." I exclaimed, sitting up and yanking the blankets away from him.

"I have to sleep somewhere, Dean." Cas remarked, a hint of irritation in his voice.

"You know what, I'll just sleep in the car..." I muttered, getting out of the bed, taking the pillow I had been using.
"Dean, it's freezing outside."

"I don't care!" I snapped as I grabbed my jacket.

"Dean, no!" Cas raising his voice made me stop digging through my bag for warmer clothes. "I'll sleep on the floor."

"No, I'm sleeping on the floor."

"But you just got out of the hospital, you take the bed."

"I'm not a damn old person, Cas!"

"I didn't say that you were, Dean."

Are we really arguing over sleeping on the floor?

"Then don't treat me like one!" I snapped, yanking a blanket off of the bed.

"Fine. And you're not sleeping on the floor Dean."

"Watch me." I spat, putting my pillow down on the floor and laying down, pulling the blanket I had snagged up around me.

I heard Cas sigh, and although I had my eyes closed, I could tell he was just standing there in quandary, obviously uncomfortable with the situation. I was getting uncomfortable myself when he stood still for hours it seemed like, but then I heard him sigh softly, then the bedsheets moving back. I listened to him get comfortable for a few minutes in bed before silence fell over us.

I listened to some kids yelling and running overhead, cars whizzing by on the freeway. The heater kicking on then off here and there.

I started regretting choosing to try and sleep on the floor, as it was hard and uncomfortable. I could probably get in the bed with Cas, but I refused to do that. It felt like I would be admitting he was right, and I wasn't about to do that. Because he wasn't right, that is.

Awake from the noises and being uncomfortable, I laid on my side, closing my eyes and trying to sleep.

I laid there awake so long, I could now hear Cas' soft breaths, heavy with sleep. I remembered how I was pleased to find out that Cas didn't snore in his sleep, and it seemed like a trait he hadn't dropped now.

His breaths were so nice to listen to, and I found myself counting them, drifting off to the rhythm of his breaths.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.
I lost count after a hundred, drowsiness weighing down my body after such a long day.

I didn't expect to be awoken by sudden screams.

"Cas?" I exclaimed automatically, my body shooting straight up in the sitting position the second I heard him on its own volition, my body scrambling to its feet as Cas continued screaming and thrashing around in the bed violently.

"Cas, Cas, hey, hey, buddy, it's okay, it's okay." I rambled, rushing around to his side of the bed, gently shaking his shoulder. "Cas?"

I had to shake him hard quite a few more times before he woke up, his body sticky with sweat and I wasn't prepared for him to slam me to the floor and pin my arms behind my back, ready to break my arms with one smooth and swift jerk.

"Jeez... It's just me, Cas." I rasped, choking for air.

Cas didn't move for a bit, just sitting on my back holding my arms in place before he gasped like he suddenly just realized what was happening.

"Oh... Dean... M-my apologies..." He rambled, and the bruising weight holding me to the ground was quickly gone, and I inhaled sharply.

"If you wanted to sit on me, why didn't you just ask." I muttered to myself irritably, pushing myself up to my feet, and I felt a hand on my shoulder helping me up. "Are you okay? Whoa, Cas-

I was caught off guard to see Cas shaking like a leaf, his eyes wild and white, roving over the entire room in unmasked terror.

"Cas..." I said softly, hating that sudden, pure terror in him, and I found myself taking slow steps towards him. "Hey, buddy, you're okay. It's alright, Angel."

Cas looked over at me, freezing up more as I advanced, and I paused, holding my hands up.

"Hey, it's alright. It's just me, Dean."

"Dean?" He said softly, his voice cracking like glass, as if he wasn't really sure it was me, and it broke my heart to see how hard his body was shaking.

"Yes, Cas, it's me." I affirmed, taking another step closer, slowly lowering my hands, and when he didn't freak out, I put my hand on his shoulder, and he instantly seemed to relax the moment I touched him, his shaking lessening. "It's okay."

He just stared at me, wide eyed and terrified, shaking like a baby bird, and I couldn't stand it. Couldn't stand how helpless he looked, because in all the time that I had known him, Cas had been anything but helpless. Cas had always been strong, had always been there for me.

Not this terrified creature...

"No, it's not..." Cas whispered, misery filling his eyes.

"What do you mean? Of course it's okay; you're safe, and I'm right here."

"They're coming."

"Who's coming?" I asked warily.
"Them. T-they're coming." Cas repeated, shaking harder and I frowned, at a loss.

*God, how do I comfort him? Think Dean, think!*

I did the first thing that came to mind. The first way that I knew how to comfort him.

I just wrapped my arms tentatively around him, and when he didn't karate kick me, I pulled him tight to my chest, cupping the back of his head as he shook against me, though he didn't hug me back.

"You're okay, Cas," I said softly, trying to keep things platonic and not feel anything, but I couldn't help it.

All I could do was sigh in relief holding him, holding him tight to me, breathing him in.

*Wet wood and honey... How I'd missed that damn smell...*

*Cas, I've missed you so much.*

"You love me."

"What?" I blinked, suddenly realizing that I had been nuzzling my face to the back of his neck, and I released him, quick to back away.

Cas just stared at me in some kind of awe, and I rubbed the back of my neck, clearing my throat.

"We should uh, get back to bed. You feeling, um, better?"

"Um-"

"Awesome, uh, nothing is coming for us, and you're okay. You're all good, right?"

"Um, y-yes." Cas stammered, obviously confused, and I kinda felt bad for confusing him, although I was glad the terror was gone from his eyes.

"Alright, uh, goodnight." I dismissed him, though I still stood there, waiting for god knows what.

Cas stood rooted in place too, the two of us seemingly lost in the spell, just staring at each other, frozen in the collision of our galaxies.

"Dean..."

"Goodnight, Cas."

*Please don't make this hurt more...*

Cas still didn't move, and I watched his Adam's apple move as he obviously tried to form a sentence of some sort.

"I'll uh, be right here on the floor if you need me." I cleared my throat, breaking the silence and turning around, grabbing the blanket I had pulled off of the bed.

"Dean, don't sleep on the floor." Cas said softly as I laid back down on the floor, facing away from him.

"What do you want me to do? I don't want to sleep with you." I instantly regretted my cold words, pulling the thin blanket up tighter around me.
God, I was a dick. Cas didn't need to hear that after having a nightmare...

Silence fell over us, and I felt worse by the second for my harsh words, Cas still not moving.

"I'm sorry..." I said softly, though I doubted Cas could hear it.

If he did hear it, he gave no indication he did, merely just going back to bed, pulling the sheets back up around him. Silence fell back over us again, and I just wanted to curl into myself and shrivel away.

*Maybe that's why Cas is gone... Because I can't even treat him right when he's here.*

I swallowed thickly, closing my eyes and tried ignoring my thorny thoughts so I could get some sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics to Angel belongs to Aerosmith.

There's a nice long chapter for you guys, I hope you enjoyed! :}


I didn't sleep well at all.

I felt miserable waking up, cold and stiff from sleeping on the floor. I was groggy and grumpy at breakfast, stuck sitting squashed next to Cas again, who hadn't said a word to me all morning, much less looked at me. I still couldn't decide if I liked or hated that fact.

It was cold outside as I repaired the battery in Claire's car, which although was luckily an easy repair, was a pain in the ass due to the cold.

After I fixed Claire's car and we were all ready to finish the journey back to the bunker, I got stuck with Cas driving Baby again, despite my protests about it.

It was probably for the better though, because I ended up crashing from weariness at one point while Led Zeppelin was playing on the radio, warm from the heater and my jacket draped over me, the seats in the impala way more comfortable than the gritty motel room floor.

I felt somewhat better when I woke up, though I couldn't remember anything, and I panicked to find myself in a car with some strange, dark haired man driving.

"Who the hell are you?!" I exclaimed, slamming myself against the passenger door of the car, wincing at the pain that shot up my body in response. "Stop!"

"Dean, it's me." The man said patiently, glancing over at me, his blue eyes slightly panicked despite his calm and collected voice.

"Who's me? Who are you, and where are we going?" I demanded, internally swearing to find that none of my usual guns and knives were on me.

Son of a bitch...

"Dean, it's me, Castiel. And we're just going back to the bunker, I believe you're experiencing a memory lapse induced by the alcohol poisoning you experienced four days ago."

"Cas?" I said slowly, the name tugging at something inside my head. Then I remembered. "You're alive?"

"Yes, Dean, I'm alive."

I felt the air leave my lungs in an instant, and my heart started racing, my vision blurring.

"H-how...? But..." I stammered, my hands starting to shake.

"Dean?" The raw concern in which he said my name made me lose it.

I never thought I'd hear his voice again...

"Cas..." I choked out, unable to stop the damned tears from falling. "I-I thought... I thought-"
"You thought what? Dean, why are you crying?"

I couldn't breathe, fully basking in the way Cas looked at me in pure, unadulterated concern every few seconds after he made sure that we were still on the road.

I couldn't believe it, Cas was here.

"Cas..." I repeated his name like an idiot, but I couldn't help it, too overwhelmed with Cas being here, and alive.

But didn't he mention alcohol poisoning?

Was I dead?

"Cas, is this heaven?" I asked, trying to comprehend how this was all happening.

"What? Dean, are you alright?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but I decided against it, Cas again asking what I was doing as I moved over to him, looking down at his arm as I put my hand on his elbow, closing my eyes as I nuzzled my face against his neck.

"Pull over Cas." I requested, a tingle racing over my skin as I breathed in that unique scent of his that I loved.

Wet wood and honey...

"Dean," I felt him shift, as if trying to get me off of him, and I frowned. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'd feel a whole lot better if you kissed me," I grumbled, Cas still driving as I felt him grab something, which he stopped doing the second I finished speaking.

"You.. You'd feel better if I kissed you?" Cas said slowly, and I rolled my eyes.

"Stop fuckin' around..." I muttered against his neck, wishing he'd pull over already. "Just kiss me."

"Dean, I think something is wrong with you..."

"What, so now you're saying I'm wrong for wantin' to kiss you? That's not funny, Cas."

"I'm not trying to be humorous... And... I'm not saying you're wrong.."

"Damn right I'm not wrong," I agreed, nuzzling against him more, though I released some of my grip on him so he could keep driving. "So get on with it."

"W-with what?"

"You know what."

"K-kissing you..?"

"No, making pie... Yes, kissing me, dumbass."

I felt him swallow, and I leaned back to look at him, his mouth in a thin line as he slowed the impala and pulled over, the snow flurries that were falling around us blanketing the windshield the instant Cas turned the car off.
"Dean, I-" Cas broke off as he turned to look at me, our faces so close, I could feel his breaths on my skin, like soft caresses.

I trailed my eyes down his face, following that familiar straight line of his nose. I followed his cheekbones with my eyes, and I followed his perpetual stubble, down to his pink lips that were parted, straight teeth just barely showing themselves. It felt like time stopped as I watched him lick his bottom lip before I looked back up into his eyes, Cas obviously in some kind of strange quandary to the situation as he just gazed at me, his eyes quickly moving back up from my lips to my eyes.

"You just gonna admire the pie, or are you gonna eat it?" I whispered, smirking slightly as Cas gasped softly, just gaping at me like a fish out of water. "You know, I might not even let you kiss me if you keep this up."

I waited- I expected Cas to say some wry remark to that before finally kissing me, but he did neither. He just sat there, staring at me as if I had just asked him to set me on fire, completely and totally unmoving. Still as a stone and making no moves to bite at my bait whatsoever.

Why was he acting so strange...?

"Cas, why are you looking at me like that..?" I queried, confused as to his behavior.

He opened his mouth to speak, but then there was a knock on the drivers side door of the impala, and the spell between us was broken as Cas and I jumped away from each other at the sound.

"Hey, everything okay?" I heaved a breath as Sam opened the door to the Impala, peering in at both Cas and I with inquisitive eyes.

"I'm not sure," Cas said lowly, and I scoffed.

"What do you mean, Cas? Sammy, we're fine."

Sam furrowed his brows at me, and Cas sighed.

"Sam, could I have a word?"

"Yeah, of course, Cas." Sam nodded, stepping back to give him room to get out.

"I'll get out too," I announced, determined to get to the bottom of why in the hell everyone was acting so damn weird, when Cas stopped me from opening the door, his hand over mine, warm and familiar.

"No- uh, Dean-" Cas cleared his throat, moving away slightly, but I refused to let him go, instantly grabbing his hand with my own, clutching it tightly, and Cas broke off, looking down at our hands for a moment, then back up at my eyes, those probing under-the-sea blue eyes searching mine before he looked away. ":-y-you stay here."

I found myself nodding, although I didn't agree with his command, my fingers latched onto his in a viselike grip.

Cas nodded in return, turning away, his hand slipping from mine, and suddenly, I remembered.

"I love you," Cas merely replied when I asked him to come with me, pressing a hasty kiss to my lips much to my surprise, and I remembered then how terrified I had been, but as soon as his lips touched mine, nothing compared to the catastrophic realization that I was loosing him.
I felt as if in the breadth of a second, an instant, a heartbeat, I had shattered like glass into thousands upon thousands of tiny unrecognizable pieces. The abrupt agony choked me, paralyzed me.

I couldn't breathe, the depth of the sudden pain punching straight through me harder than the swift bite of a bullet, and even more unceremoniously than a werewolf ripping out a still beating heart. I felt like my entire world was being ripped out from underneath me, my entire life, my very being, and there was nothing left to do now but fall, fall, fall.

I remember wanting to reply to that, do something, but I couldn't remember how then, or how to do what I wanted, and it made the emotional pain the set of cuffs that had bound me since I had lost him.

I remembered the last foreign word he said, the harsh syllables rolling off of his tongue as it set off a harsh burst of wind and blue light up in a bright brilliance, and I was scrambling to find his hands when they were wrenched away from mine, the lack of contact jarring and terrifying.

That had been exactly when I had lost him.

Right as I let go.

Falling farther and farther and deeper and deeper, the beautiful creature nowhere to be found.

I had lost him. I had let go.

Again, that bone crushing panic set over me again, and I lurched forward, grabbing his arm, my knuckles white with how tight my grip was.

"No," I choked out, Cas turning to stare at me, eyes wide. "No, I won't let you go again, not while I'm still kickin' you son of a bitch."

"Dean?" His voice was choked, scared.

"Don't... just don't-" I broke off, unable to form my words anymore beyond the panicking thought of don't let go.

"Cas-?" I vaguely heard Sam, but I was too lost in the depths of Cas' eyes, those azure orbs that were unreadable, eyes that I used to be able to look into and speak to without uttering a word.

Eyes that were now as dull and devoid of passionate emotion as my heart.

Then, I suddenly realized the truth.

I had lost him as soon as I let go.

I choked, asphyxiating myself on my own painful realizations, and for the first time in my life, I knew what it felt like when reality was far too damn real.

This isn't the heaven I remember from the damn field trip Sam and I had gotten ages ago...

Cas still staring at me, I knew in my subconscious that I should let go, but I couldn't bring myself to, only stare at him as if I was hypnotized and keep my death grip on his arm. I knew my grip had to be hurting him, as the skin of my knuckles was as white as the snow outside, the tendons in my hand appearing fit to burst.

"Cas?" I heard Sam call again, Cas and I still locked in each other's gaze, although I now saw, wasn't the way we used to look at each other.
"Not the same way we used to communicate..."

"Coming..." Cas said slowly, and I could feel him still looking at me as I broke the trance, looking away as I swallowed thickly.

I felt like I was ripping myself apart as I forced myself to release my grip on Cas, seemingly finger by finger, tendon by tendon. Nerve by nerve wracking splitting emotion as I forced myself to do what every voice, every instinct, every terror within me begged me not to do.

The most primal part of me was screaming at me in every way possible to *never* let go.

"Dean?" Cas said softly, in that way he used to say my name when he knew something was wrong, and my chest ached at the memories.

"Go, Sam is waiting." I forced myself to say, though I was unable to look at him, fiddling with my jacket button.

Cas seemed to hesitate a moment longer before getting out of the car, shutting the door behind him.

The wind beating against the Impala and the roar of the freeway made it impossible to hear anything Cas and Sam were saying outside the car, but I wasn't all too interested in hearing what they were saying when I remembered all the events leading up to this moment, and I groaned.

*Leave it to me to have a memory lapse at the worst damn time...*

*But... Cas seemed genuinely concerned about me-*

I stopped my train of thoughts right there, refusing to let them go any farther with that. There was no point in trying to give life to things that couldn't keep themselves alive.

I distracted myself with Led Zeppelin, quickly skipping Fool in The Rain when it came on, humming along to Stairway To Heaven until Cas got back in the car, and after a quick mental debate on demanding to ride with someone else, *anyone* else, I tossed the idea out the window. I knew that Sam wouldn't let Rayne trade places with me, and Claire's car was stuffed full of her things, so that was out. I was stuck in my damn car with my awkward ex driving until we got home.

I sighed, ignoring Cas as he started the Impala again, the snow sliding off of the windshield as he turned on the windshield wipers, revealing the freeway again, Claire's blue Volkswagen already merging back on the freeway. I expected Cas to follow suit, but he didn't, just sitting there, hand over the keys in the ignition.

"Dean-"

"I'm fine, I'm uh, sorry about uh, earlier. I didn't remember." I interrupted quickly, clearing my throat as I stroked my chin nervously.

"Dean, that's not-"

"Can we not talk about this." I said, my words coming out much harsher than I meant them to, and I internally swore to myself, but didn't apologize for my cold words.

The atmosphere in the car quickly became as frosty as the weather outside, as Cas said nothing more, and I was pretty sure he sighed in response to that, but I couldn't tell over the loud roar of the Impala's engine as she lurched into motion back onto the freeway.
If Cas debated on changing his mind on taking up what he was going to say as we continued on down the highway, following Sam's red truck, I didn't give him any opportunity to, playing music too loud for conversation. I really didn't want to hear his excuses, or pities, especially since I couldn't shake the damn mortification from my earlier actions.

I had flat out asked Cas to **kiss** me, and while in the past, I would've loved to have said that to Cas to see his reaction, but now... Now there was no point, and I had just made a damn fool of myself.

*If I didn't look needy before, I sure as hell did now.*

I didn't dare look over at Cas again, refusing to see the improbable scorn there, the mirthless smile that might follow, failing to mask an obvious contempt for me. I wouldn't be able to stand that, see yet again the stark contrast between my Cas and New Cas. See the blue eyes I once found myself seared into like a brand, now placid and dark with unsaid terrors and horrors.

I didn't need any further reminders that my Cas was dead and gone, truly lost to The Empty.

It was a fitting place for us to lose each other, all of the memories I had slipping out of me like water seeping through the cracks in a ship as Cas slipped away from me without me even knowing it.

It was ironic, and I couldn't help but scoff mirthlessly at my own thoughts.

My life was just one big series of events of loosing things without even realizing it until it was too late.

First, it was my mom, her death so quick and abrupt, I remember not being able to understand it for weeks after, and I would never forget the pain in my dad's eyes whenever I had asked, *"Where's mom?"*

Then it was Sam, and I remember the night he left for college, the rage dad had been in for weeks after, and learning over the years that Sam at first wanted nothing but to leave me and our dad, too focused on normalcy to want to truly be my brother.

Then it was dad, and if I had known that the hunting trip he went on before he disappeared would be the start of the clock ticking down to the end of his life, I would've tried to find some other way, tried to kill Azazel by myself sooner.

Sure, things would be different, but at least dad would've been alive, and Sam safe and married to Jess.

Sure, maybe all the people Sam and I had saved might be dead then, but a lot of other people would probably be alive.

*Ellen, Jo, Bobby, Rufus, Charlie, Kevin, Sam's old girlfriend Eileen...*

*So much death...*

*And Cas...*

He'd still be a dick perched on a cloud, but he'd of been safe, whole.

So many things would be different if I had done things differently...

*Or never existed.*

That familiar hollow emptiness made my chest ache at these thoughts, and despite the slight nausea at
the thought, a part of me wanted to drown myself in alcohol, to just numb my body and thoughts.

Some people would say they preferred pain over emptiness, because at least they felt something, but I disagreed. I nearly inadvertently killed myself trying to achieve that sense of numbness, that sweet nothingness.

I wanted the hollowness, the lack of emotions, the lack of feeling. I wanted the sweet, sweet black bliss of ever encompassing death, but I was too much of a coward to put a bullet through my skull.

I didn't lodge a bullet in my brain purely for Sam's sake. It wouldn't be fair to him, and the damn son of a bitch would probably just bring me back anyways. I didn't need to come back from my siesta with satan just to find that my brother had pimped out his soul to him.

I sighed, shifting in my jacket higher over my shoulders as I moved in my seat, getting more comfortable as I prepared for the long drive still left ahead of us.

We all stopped to refuel and stretch our legs and use the restroom about an hour later, and I busied myself looking at snacks in the gas station to avoid Cas, being sure to avoid any potential conversation with him. The second we were all ready to go, I was quick to turn the radio back on the second Cas started the Impala, internally thanking god that I had a damn near endless collection of music, playing Metallica, Black Sabbath, AC/DC, Led Zeppelin and any other cassette tape of mine necessary to fill the silence and keep Cas from saying a word to me, and he tried. He always tried when we stopped for gas, or when a cassette tape of mine ended, but luckily, I knew all those cassette tapes better than the back of my own hand, and the second the song ended, I was sticking in another cassette tape, shutting down any chance Cas may have had to speak.

It was about eight that evening when we finally made it back to the bunker after picking up some food to eat in town before heading back home to the bunker. Once we were home, I was faster than The Flash getting out of the Impala, grabbing my things out of the trunk and rushing back to my room, thanking god I could finally get away.

I was debating on putting my clothes away, when Claire came into my room.

"So, you guys got a guest bedroom in this place?" She held up her bag for emphasis.

"Oh, yeah." I nodded, abandoning my bag and gesturing for her to follow me as I walked back out into the hallway. "So that's- Cas' room," I cleared my throat, pointing out his room next to mine. "You know where mine is, and Rayne's room is right here, Sam and Jazz's over there," I pointed out their respective rooms at the end of the hallway, then opened up the next four room doors, revealing empty bedrooms. "And here's the other rooms we have, so take your pick."

"Sweet," Claire grinned, choosing the second room labeled twenty-five, dropping her purple duffle bag in it.

"We can go to town tomorrow and get you a bed and whatever you need," I offered, watching Claire look over the room as I leaned on the doorframe. "You can sleep in my bed tonight if you'd like, and I'll sleep on the couch."

"No, it's okay, I'll sleep on the couch."

"Really Claire, take the bed, I don't mind."

"Dean, I've been sleeping in my car for the past few weeks, the couch will be more than comfortable."
I frowned at that, pursing my lips in disapproval and now it was her turn to roll her eyes.

"I'm sure you've had to sleep in worse places, Dean."

"Just because you have, doesn't mean that you should skimp out when you have the chance to sleep in something made for sleeping."

"You're one to talk."

I raised an eyebrow.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You didn't even sleep in the bed with Cas last night, did you? I bet you slept on the floor."

"Why do you say that?"

"You're walking like you're an old man, that's why."

I sighed, chewing on my bottom lip, at a loss for words at being caught.

"That's different."

"Is it?"

I rolled my eyes, pushing myself off the doorframe.

"I don't need to explain myself to you."

"Maybe not, but you're a hypocrite."

"Don't speak to me like that."

"Okay, for your information, the 'dad' thing ended the second we left the hospital, so don't try to use the dad card on me."

"Fine," I snapped. "Then why are you riding my ass about this?"

"It's Cas." Claire said simply, as my chest ached at how those two little words said everything.

"Yeah, well," I cleared my throat, taking a step back out of the room. "A lot's changed."

"Sure."

The disbelief in her voice was as clear as day, but I didn't comment upon it, looking away.

"Just let me know tomorrow when you wanna go get things for your room, and we'll go."

"Sure. Goodnight, Dean. And I'm sleeping on the couch."

I sighed, rolling my eyes, but I couldn't help but smile.

"Night, Claire."
"I thought we said to be ready an hour ago, Claire!" I yelled, banging on the bathroom door as I rolled my eyes.

"Would you chill out?" I stepped back as she opened the door, flipping her hip length hair over her shoulder. "I haven't been able to use a real bathroom in weeks."

"Real bathroom?" I queried as I rolled my eyes, walking with Claire to her room.

"Yeah, you should know what I mean. As in a bathroom that actually has a shower and everything in it, instead of just a toilet and a sink and grimy walls."

"You got me," I admitted, thinking back to some pretty damn filthy and shady ass bathrooms I'd had to use before on the road.

"Exactly," Claire agreed, grabbing her purse out of her duffle bag. "I'm ready."

"Finally."

"Shut up you old skeezer."

"Excuse me?" I demanded, the two of us stopping in our tracks as Cas turned into the hallway coming out of his room.

"Where are you two going?" He asked, drinking something warm out of a mug, the steam rising out of it like tiny ghosts.

"The mall, going to get some things for my room." Claire explained as I crossed my arms and looked away. "Wanna come?"

"Oh. You two wouldn't you mind if I accompanied you?"

"No. "Yes."

We all paused at me and Claire's combined outburst, Cas staring down fixedly at the floor as I then turned to Claire, her 'say-yes-or-I-will-murder-your-entire-family' death glare - which had gotten a hell of a lot scarier in the last five years - made me quickly turn back to Cas, begrudgingly grumbling out a yes. In which, Cas looked right back up at us, a twinkle in his eye.

"You mean it?"

"Yes. Let's go." I snapped, not at all amused with what Claire seemed to be trying to do - I wasn't that stupid. At least, I tried to hope.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you, Cas," Claire said as we all started walking down the hallway and to the garage. "Though you wouldn't remember."

"When had we last seen each other?" I faintly heard Cas query as I got inside the car, starting the engine, though their conversation got loud again as they got back in the car; Cas sitting in the back while Claire sat in the front.

"About five years, maybe even longer than that." Claire explained as she sat in the front seat with me while Cas sat in the back.

"Why didn't we see each other sooner then?"
Conversation between Cas and Claire carried on long into the drive to town, and continued even into
the mattress store, where I bought a reasonably priced small mattress for Claire's room.

Claire then practically dragged us to some antique store, which smelled like wood, old women and
Patchouli - not pleasurable smells at all to my nose - though the cheap rustic white dresser made up
for it. She also bought herself a lamp with a black and white plaid lamp cover to match with it, then
we headed to the mall afterwards, for extra things, Claire said, though I was wanting to go home or
have Sam call about a hunt now, because I had become the damn third wheel of the group, and it
showed.

"Okay," Claire said suddenly, the three of us stopping in the middle of the mall by a bunch of leather
chairs in a circle, like someone was about to hold a meeting there any second. Or satanic ritual in
style. "This is where we go our separate ways."

"Why?" I grouched, my feet starting to hurt and the desire to just get the fuck back to the bunker
intensifying.

"I need to get me some new clothes since half my closet has been torn up or ruined from hunting." She
sighed, crossing her arms. "And I don't need you guys standing there staring at your watches
every five seconds waiting for me to hurry up."

"You're already taking forever." I pointed out.

"Whatever, Dean." She rolled her eyes. "I'll meet you guys back here in an hour. See ya."

And with that, she was flipping her long hair over her shoulder and walking off, leaving Cas and I to
our own devices.

Son of a bitch... I'm gonna kill her.

"Well," Cas broke the tense silence that had fallen over us. "What would you like to do, Dean?"

I sighed, shifting the bag of posters Claire had bought from Hot Topic over my shoulder, already
itching to blow my brains out. "I'd like to go home is what."

Cas sighed.

"We can't Dean, so I suppose we deal with this sensibly and civilly and await Claire's return."

"You mean wait here?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Yeah, well, you can, but I'm gonna walk around. I'm not waiting here for the next two hours."
Shaking my head, I picked a direction to go in the mall and went with it, Cas following along behind
me if the footsteps I heard said anything.

"I'll go with you."

"Knock yourself out." I sighed, too tired and fed up to try escaping the thing that was my ex.

My ex... The pang was still there every time I thought about it...

"Dean, what's that?"

I stopped walking, and so abruptly, I tripped a bit over my own feet a bit.
"What?" I grumbled, biting my lip anxiously.

"That."

I followed Cas' pointing finger, my throat tightening as I saw the very same photo booth him and I had taken our pictures in, almost three years ago.

*So long ago...*

"T-that.. T-that's a uh, a photo booth," I stammered, hastily looking away.

"Oh. Is it required that you kiss your partner?" Cas asked as he tilted his head, squinting at the giant brazen fucking printing of the African American couple kissing on the booth.

"Uh, no."

"That's just an idea of what you could do."

"I'd like to try that..."*

I swallowed thickly, my throat suddenly asphyxiating me.

*It's happening again...*

"No..." I whispered, swallowing thickly yet again, dropping the bag of god knows what out of my hand.

"Could we try that- Dean?" I vaguely heard Cas calling my name, but I couldn't hear it.

"I need some air." I muttered, not even caring to wait for Cas' response to that as I started running to the nearest exit, desperate for fresh air.

Son of a bitch, did the universe enjoy using me as it's jester? Something there to toss around, shoot and stab and bleed for it's sadistic pleasure? Could I not get one break?

I shoved open the door leading outside with gusto, heading over to the wooden bench I saw under a tree as I pulled out my phone. A small part of me wanted to get wasted to all hell, but I knew I had to drive Claire and him home, not to mention the thought of it was still somewhat revolting after my unhappy endeavor a few days ago, so I decided to call Sam instead.

"Hello? Dean?" Sam answered after the first two rings. "What's up?"

"Nothin'." I took a breath, rubbing my face, hoping he couldn't sense my distress. "Just bored out of my mind."

"Why?"

"Claire," I sighed, looking back at the door I came out of, hoping Cas wouldn't follow me. "Shopping for clothes. You know how girls are with shopping."

Sam chuckled, and the sound was so familiar, it helped ease the terrifying anxiety that still pulsed through me, the sheer deja vu and irony scaring me out of my goddamn mind.

"So.. uh, have you found a case yet?" I prodded, wanting to talk about something else as I glanced around the decently full parking lot, a car horn honking in the distance.
"Yeah, actually. I just found a news article about this girl, named Kara Foster," I could faintly hear keys clicking, and I smiled to myself, almost able to see Sam's pensive expression as he typed away on his laptop. "She was found with her heart ripped out, but it's not a werewolf, because the heart was found near her body, and with initials burned onto it it seems. L.R.? Nobody knows what it means, and I can't find any connections."

"Guess we better check it out." I mused, already curious about the case.

"'We'? Dean, in case you forgot, you're still recovering from alcohol poisoning." Sam remarked, and I rolled my eyes wearily.

"Sam, I'm fine. Besides, we have to find the ghost first anyways." I reminded him. "That means playing the good cop and asking around, or did you forget?"

The sigh Sam gave at that was audible even through the phone, and I would've laughed if I wasn't so damn fed up with everything.

"Dean-"

"I will go by my damn self." I threatened, very much done with everyone's 'you're still on the mend' bullshit. "Right after I drive Cas and Claire back, I'm going."

"Fine." Sam snapped. "Then I'm going with you."

"Whatever." I yelled into the phone, ending the call and scowling out at the parking lot, now pissed and sour.

Could Claire just hurry the hell up?

I tapped my foot anxiously, wishing I could shoot or punch something for fucks sake. I was tired of everything being shoved into my face. Tired of the bullshit with Cas, tired of missing him even though he was right there, tired of always being reminded that the one thing I had wanted more than anything in years was just fucking gone. I was sick of it, fucking pissed and tired of every goddamn thing being eventually taken from me one thing at a time. Wasn't my parents and virtually every friend I once had being killed and taken from my life not enough? Wasn't all the goddamn sacrifices I made all my life, forfeiting college, normalcy, a house with a white picket fence, wife (or husband) and rug rats not fucking enough? Were the countless lives I'd helped saved - the fucking world - not enough?

I wanted to scream, but of course, I couldn't now, and I could sense that anything could set me off and I would explode. A part of me hoped that Claire would return after an hour like she'd said, but I doubted it.

You know, fuck it.

I stood up, shooting Claire a text.

**Me: Sam and I got a case, let's go.**

Pocketing my phone, I got up, walking back the way I came.

She better not give me hell about this or I swear-

Reaching the door to the mall, I opened it, walking back inside.
I suddenly wondered if I should've texted Cas, but I realized I wouldn't need to as I approached the accursed photo booth, Claire and Cas giggling outside of it as they looked at something.

"Ready to go?" I sighed, not at all amused with their antics.

"Dean, look at these." Claire giggled, holding a row of photos out to me, and upon closer inspection, it was just Claire and Cas making dumb, goofy faces for the camera, and although Cas looked constipated and tense in all the pictures, it was still funny, but I was too irritable to care all too much.

"Yeah, that's nice," I muttered noncommittally, pulling out my car keys. "Why don't we start-"

"Dean, we should do it." Claire suddenly exclaimed, looping her arm through mine and tugging me towards it. "Come on, the last time you and I did anything fun is when you took me to go play mini golf years ago."

"I really don't think-"

"No, we're doing it." Claire said authoritatively, practically shoving me inside the photo booth. "Come on, it'll be fun. And smile." She enunciated the word, feeding the machine some money before jumping into the booth with me, the screen counting down to the picture being taken. "Dean!" She jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow when it showed us a quick preview of the last picture, showing my extremely displeased face. "At least act like you have a soul."

I sighed heavily, making weak attempts at funny faces for the next four pictures, exhaling in relief once it was done, sliding to get out of the booth after Claire got out, but she blocked my path.

"You and Cas should take pictures," she mused as she looked over our pictures, and I bristled.

"No."

"Oh come on," she smiled at me, and by the devilish gleam in her eyes, I knew that she knew exactly what she was doing. "You can have updated couple pictures."

"So, kissing is required in this instance?" Cas asked, and he looked way too damn comfortable with that statement for me to handle.

"If that's what you guys want." Claire smirks at me as I glared daggers at her.

Oh, I'm gonna kill her.

"Claire-"

"Come on Cas," Claire ignored me, waving Cas over. "I'll pay for you guys."

"No, dammit!" I suddenly yelled, at the end of my fucking rope. "Leave it alone, Claire! Let's go. We have a case to worry about, not goddamn pictures."

Claire was startled at my outburst, instinctively stepping back away from me, giving me the room I needed to get out of the photo booth.

"Dean-"

"No!" I yelled, not giving a damn about the probable attention I was gathering. "I'm tired of all of you guys shoving me at Cas! It's none of your guy's damn business what happens between Cas and I, and I would really fucking appreciate it if you guys started understanding that!" I snapped, both Cas and Claire quiet. "Now let's go, Sam and I have a case to work."
I didn't bother waiting for their response if they had one, rolling my eyes and walking back towards the exit.

It was going to be a long drive home.

_____________________

The drive back to the bunker was as tense and quiet like I expected, and Sam left with Claire in his pickup truck to pick up her mattress and dresser, while Jazz and I carried the other thing's Claire got to her room.

Cas holed himself up in his room as soon as we got back, and I was grateful no one said a word to me, not even Jazz, though I could tell there were a couple times she almost did.

Once Sam and Claire returned thirty minutes later, I helped Sam carry the bed and dresser to Claire's room, the two of us changing into our fed suits after we finished, leaving the girls and Cas to their own devices as Sam and I got in the impala, heading out to take a look at our next case.

"So," Sam said after about twenty minutes of silence on our way to the case, another twenty minutes left until we made it to the Podunk town the case was located at. "Claire told me about your little fit in at the mall."

"I swear, if you bring up Cas and try to guilt trip me, I will break your nose." I swore, glowering outside the windshield.

Sam sighed.

"Dean, this is getting old."

"Tell me about it."

"I mean you, Dean." Sam scoffed. "I'm sick of this 'wandering the earth alone' kung fu crap. I can see right through it- we can see right through it."

"Who's we?" I demanded.

"Who do you think? Everyone who currently lives in the bunker." Sam rolls his eyes. "Probably even Cas."

"Fine, what is it you guys are 'seeing'?" I demanded, quickly losing my temper.

"That you're still in love with Cas." Sam exclaimed. "You know, you're an idiot Dean."

"Excuse me?!" I yelled, bristling.

"I mean it." I saw Sam shake his head out of the corner of my eye. "I see it in the way you look at him, even the way you talk to him sometimes when you're not being an asshole. Dean, you love him, and you won't admit it."

"Actually, I did that one night like two months ago if you remember." I hissed. "Look where that got
"Dean, you were wasted..."

"Can't please anyone these days.." I muttered.

"Pull over."

"What?"

"You heard me. Pull over."

I sighed loudly, rolling my eyes, but I slowed the impala, pulling over onto a dirt road, parking the Impala and getting out of the car and slamming the door.

"What is this about, because I'm-" I was cut off mid sentence by a solid punch in the face, pain exploding over my skin instantly, as well as hot wetness dripping down from my nose. "Son of a bitch.." I swore, reflexively grabbing my bleeding nose, glaring at Sam. "Sam, what the hell!"

"Would you just listen dammit?!" Sam exclaimed, his chest heaving with rage and exertion.

"How about you fuck off." I yelled, swinging at Sam, who narrowly dodged my blow. "Quit telling me what to feel and acting like you know how it feels!"

"Dean, I know all too well how it feels to lose someone you love." Sam exclaimed, his hand up in surrender as we circled each other. "How do you think I felt losing Jess?!"

"Yeah, well, you didn't have to deal with her coming back and not remembering you at all." I spat bitterly.

"No, I didn't," Sam admitted, the dull look overcoming his eyes making a part of me ache for him, but I was too livid to care. "But I would've given anything to have her back, with her memory or not. I would give anything to hear her laugh again, taste her cookies.." Sam laughed sadly, our circling slowing as I remembered telling Cas stupid stories from me and Sam's childhood, his bright, beautiful laughter, how much he enjoyed Italian food...

"Dean, you have this chance to still be with Cas, to build new memories with him, and you're throwing it away." Sam stared at me with wide, incredulous eyes, willing me to see his point with a fevered passion. "I know it hurts seeing him like that, I know it does, but you can't keep blaming yourself for what happened."

"You think I'm blaming myself?!" I hissed, his words hitting a nerve in me.

"You say that like I don't know you," Sam smiled wryly. "I know you, Dean, and I know when you blame yourself for things, and this is exactly what you do when you blame yourself."

"What exactly am I doing?" I demanded, taking another swing at him, my fist just grazing Sam's cheek before he jumped back.

"Drinking, avoiding the subject, angry- need I go on?" Sam pursed his lips, pity on his face. "Dean, Cas has been trying to connect with you, but you just push him away. You're sabotaging any potential you and Cas still may have left of fixing things and being together."

"There's nothing to fix." I retorted bitterly.

"You're selfish, and stupid, you know that?" Sam shook his head, disbelief and frustration bleeding
out of his expression.

"Me? Selfish and stupid? That's damn rich, I'm the one who saved his ass." I snapped.

"Dean, love isn't about owing favors, or expecting payments," Sam sighed heavily, and in such a way, it gave me the impression that I was a petulant child that couldn't see the obvious solution to my problem. "Love is about sacrifice, and compromises. Love is about accepting them in all their flaws and illnesses. True love is unconditional, Dean, and I sure don't see you going out of your way for Cas like he has done for you in the past." Sam simply stared at me, like he wasn't really expecting me to listen, but wanted to get his point out in the open either way.

"I tried." I hissed. "But Cas just thinks of me as a drunken liar."

"Have you really given him much else to go on?" He shrugged helplessly. "I mean, why do you think he asked us about you when you went on your little trip? Because he couldn't get to know you any other way."

"He asked about me? Right." I laughed mirthlessly.

"He did, Dean." Sam confirmed, his face calm and empathetic, willing me to listen. "Look, I'm not really supposed to tell you this, but he cares - maybe not the exact same way he did before - but he cares. Dean, you should have seen his face when we got that call from Claire when you went to the hospital. He was a wreck with guilt, Dean. It took Jazz and I forever to even calm him down."

"You're lying." I growled automatically, my chest aching. "Shut up."

"He blames himself you know," Sam said as I turned away to get back in the car, stopping me both from telling Sam to get his ass back in the car, and my progress altogether. "He thinks it's his fault you're unhappy, and the reason you ended up in the hospital. He's even thought about leaving."

"What?" I asked, hating how choked I sounded as I turned back to Sam.

"I convinced him to stay," Sam continued. "But it's eating at him, Dean. He knows how much you hurt, and it weighs on him."

"Yeah, well it should." I said wryly, ignoring the nagging feeling in my chest I refused to name.

"Dammit Dean!" Sam yelled, startling me slightly, and it seemed that he was about to go on a rant, but he stopped, heaving a huge breath, pinching the bridge of his nose. He took a moment to collect himself, before lowering his hand and calmly continuing. "All I'm saying, is that if you keep being an asshole and not at least try to meet Cas halfway, you're forfeiting any chance you have left with Cas, as well as the chance to heal. You're losing him, Dean, and if you don't do something about it, you're going to lose him a second time, and I don't think Cas will be as empathetic and forgiving as he was before the empty."

Sam shook his head, waving his hand.

"Let's just go get this interview done, alright?" Sam sighed, rubbing his face. "We don't have much left of daylight."

He gave me a weak smile before getting back in the car, shutting the door as I tried processing everything.

Cas asked about me? He felt guilty? He considered leaving so I would be happy?
I could barely wrap my mind around what Sam told me, all my previous rage and frustration replaced with just speechless numbness. I didn't know what to think, much less even feel.

Taking a breath, I dimly acknowledged my realization that Sam was waiting for me in the Impala, so I turned around and got back in the car, glad that Sam was listening to something on his phone through his headphones.

*God knew I would need some time to process this...*
Hey everyone, so sorry I disappeared off of the face of the earth for a while there, I was going through a typical dry spell unfortunately, but I'm bouncing back from it. :) I have so many ideas for future chapters, though it's difficult to say if I'll even be able to write them down since I've been so busy with my job of late, but definitely expect this story to be finished soon!

Thank you all for the support, and best of wishes to you all.

- Destinee

Twelve

The interview ended up being somewhat helpful, and we got a lead on who the ghost may be, but we needed to do more research to be certain and try to find the motive. So having exhausted our leads for the moment, Sam and I decided to call it a day and head on home.

I was grateful for the distraction of the interviews though, as it was a familiar and easy process that I knew how to handle, unlike my current predicament. I still hardly knew what to make of Sam's confession, but as I calmed down and processed it as the day wore on, I saw that Sam was right in one regard; I was being an asshole. I wasn't meeting Cas halfway, and I wasn't even giving him a chance.

Suddenly Rayne's words the morning after my drunken night months ago made sense, and I was shaking my head, laughing wryly.

Guess I was being a blind dumbass...

So, with that in mind, I decided to start making amends right away - starting with dinner.

I bought Italian food and brought everyone something for dinner, knowing it was Cas' favorite. I also went through the trouble of buying Claire a gift card to Kohls so she could buy herself some new clothes. I was sure to give her a sincere apology as well - the guilt weighing on me for lashing out at her unnecessarily - and she gave me a wry but sincere smile and told me that all was forgiven.

Now, hours later after dinner - which went fine, though I could tell Cas was still wary of me - I was wide awake in the living room by myself. Jazz and Sam had been with me earlier, but had snuck off giggling sometime doing god knows what - which I probably didn't want to know anyways - while Rayne went to bed. Claire was busy obsessing over decorating her room, and Cas was holed up in his room again.

I debated on knocking on his door and working on traveling the road of forgiveness, but I was too much of a coward to knock, not to mention that I didn't even know where to begin. So that was how
I ended up in the living room, scrolling through movies on Netflix for something to watch as I gnawed at my emotions.

I ended up playing *The Breakfast Club* since I hadn't seen it in a while, turning up the volume and getting comfortable on the couch under a fluffy blanket with my beer, preparing to probably end up crashing there eventually as I still absentmindedly devised ways of making amends to Cas.

I had just gotten to the part where Bender takes the bolt out of the door, when a voice made me jump and nearly spill my beer.

"Do you mind if I join you?"

"Jeez..." I exclaimed, exhaling to see Cas standing in the doorway. "Don't do that."

"My apologies." Cas replied, his eyes glued to the tv. "What movie is this?"

I was about to say some snarky, wiseass remark, but I remembered what Sam had said earlier that afternoon, and it stopped me.

*I had to try... I owed Cas that much after all he had done for me, even if he didn't remember.*

"The Breakfast Club, and sure, you can watch." I sat up as I took a breath to steady myself, gesturing to the empty space I made for Cas on the couch.

Cas looked at the spot I made for him, then at me, as if he was assessing my temper before he stiffly sat on the opposite end of the couch.

I exhaled, looking back over at the tv. It was quiet in the bunker tonight, the atmosphere calm for once, and it eased my nerves somewhat, but not entirely.

The guilt was gnawing at me, just realizing how crass and poor my behavior had been, and how indifferent I had been to what Cas had been dealing with - everything. I was a selfish bastard, and I hated myself for it, and hated that I had let it control me. Although I was still wary about giving Cas a chance and terrified of opening myself up to be hurt by apologizing and scared as all hell to try now, I knew it was right. It *felt* right to try and fix things. Hell, it was the only damn thing that's really felt right in my gut since Cas had been back.

"Hey, uh, Cas..?" I found myself saying, my mouth seemingly having a mind of its own as I kept my gaze locked on the tv, too cowardly to even look at him. "I-I'm.. I'm sorry.. for everything..

I cleared my throat, drinking my beer, a part of me aching as I couldn't help but feel the deja vu from our first kiss, but I forced the memories away. I'd be damned if I fucked this up even more.

Cas didn't answer, and I felt myself shrinking back, my heart sinking to the pit of my stomach.

That's it. I screwed it all up. I'm too late.

"I apologize as well."

I exhaled the breath I didn't know I had been holding, finally risking a glance over at Cas, who was still staring at the tv.

"For what?" I asked, my voice sounding as small as I felt.

"For what I said about you the night you left." He looked over at me, expression stoic and placid, but like always, his eyes conveyed the emotions his face didn't. "I know now that I was wrong. That's
what I was trying to tell you at the hospital that day."

"I'm sorry." I said softly, stuck in the blue of his eyes.

Cas smiled a little, a beautiful glow filling his face, and I found myself smiling a little in response to it.

"I forgive you." Cas said in earnest, his eyes as sincere as ever, and it warmed me.

"Thank you." I don't deserve it, you shouldn't forgive me. You should leave, you'll be happier.

Cas, I'll just bring you down.. I'll just hurt you again, because I let down everyone I've ever loved..

"You're welcome." Cas said simply, looking back at the tv.

"Cas..?" I said tentatively after a couple minutes, still not feeling that my apology was adequate.

"Yes, Dean?" Cas looked over at me, patiently waiting for me to finish.

"I-I.. well," I stammered, flushing, any bravado I may have had gone. "I.. I was wondering, if we could, well..-

"What is it Dean?" No malice or impatience in his voice at all, just patience, which I should've expected since it was Cas, but it still hit me like it did the first day I realized it, and I would probably never get used to his honesty, sincerity, and patience if I wanted to be honest with myself.

"I was wondering if we could start over." I cleared my throat. "I-I want to start over on a clean slate. With you."

I waited for it. The rebuke, the scoff, the nasty look, the disdain.

*The hurt.*

I waited for it, prepared myself for it, but it didn't come, and what I wasn't prepared for, was the small, near imperceptible smile Cas gave me when he looked at me.

"I'd like that." Cas said, and he seemed *shy*, his eyes cast down as he smiled a little.

I found myself smiling in relief, a weight lifting itself off of me.

I suddenly wanted to kiss him, to hold him tight in my arms, and to see more of that smile. I wanted to prove to him that everything that Sam, Jazz, and whoever else that told him anything positive about me, was true. I wanted to prove my worth to him, to be who I should've been in the beginning, who I should've *always* been. I should've been Cas' boyfriend, picking up the slack and nursing Cas back to health and helping him cope, instead of leaving him on his own to fend for himself like I hadn't cared, treating him like he was nobody.

*I should've been his everything.*

*How had I forgotten that?*

I wanted to kiss him, but I didn't. We would have to take baby steps, and it seemed like I had just taken the biggest one, the one needed to set everything in motion.

"Dean?" Cas roused me from my musings, and I blinked, realizing I had zoned out while staring at him, though Cas hadn't noticed as far as I could tell, or he didn't care to comment upon it.
"Yeah?" I cleared my throat, looking back over at the tv for a moment before back at him.

"Could you hand me a blanket?" He asked, nodding over to the blanket rack on the opposite of me.

"Well," I chewed on my bottom lip, looking back over at the blanket rack, then at the blanket already in my lap. "We could, uh, share. If you want." I suggested, flushing.

I started getting worried when Cas said nothing, though when I looked over at him, he didn't seem adverse to the idea, though he was obviously contemplating it - if the pensive furrow of his brows said anything.

"W-we don't have to...- Never mind." I muttered, reaching over the arm of the couch to grab him a blanket, when my leg was being tugged at slightly.

"No, we will share." Cas said with authority, and I started laughing at the concentrative furrow of his brow as he tried to get the blanket out from it's tangle around my legs. "Dean, I don't see how this is humorous."

"It- you-" I stammered, laughing too hard to form a sentence, helping Cas untangle the blanket from my legs, and once it was free, I just let myself fall back against the couch as I laughed, a sudden sense of peace washing over me as I did so.

I couldn't remember the last time I had really laughed; laughed out of the sheer moment, not from malice or sarcasm. It was freeing, and I succumbed to the happiness that swept over me, the previous guilt and stresses from the day seemingly leaking out of me with each laugh and gasp for air. It felt good to laugh, as stupid and menial as it was.

Taking a breath, wiping the corners of my moist eyes, I looked over to find Cas just staring at me, his expression unreadable, but there wasn't any condescending malice in his shielded expression.

"What?" I asked, bristling slightly.

"You're chipper tonight." He said simply, his head tilted slightly as he studied me, like I was some newfound creature freshly discovered in a rainforest; beautiful to admire, but had the potential to be deadly with the snap of a finger.

I flushed, looking away, fixing the blanket so it covered both of us, although it wasn't entirely ideal, since the blanket couldn't sufficiently cover the both of us unless we scooted closer to each other. I wasn't pushing my limits tonight though, so I didn't move, fiddling with a loose string on the edge of the cream colored blanket.

Not another word was said between Cas and I for the rest of the movie, and although the silence between us wasn't the same companionable silence that he and I had built up over the years, it was comfortable nonetheless. I still could hardly believe that Cas had forgiven me, and was seemingly willing to try and fix this insane thing that was us.

He was too good for me...

We stayed in our respective corners of the couch until the movie ended, Cas helping me fold up and put away the blanket after we turned off the tv.

"I see why you like that film so much." Cas mused as he handed me the blanket we had used, now folded up.

"Yeah?" I asked, putting the blanket back among its brethren on the blanket rack.
"Yes," Cas nodded, a brooding expression on his face. "I see now that the five children represent the various intricacies of the human soul, and how after they had induced the use of Cannabis, found harmony within each other and learned to coexist and became a whole. It's very strange to me how it's frowned upon to take advantage of the many pharmaceutical properties of Cannabis." Cas frowned, thinking deeply to himself as I raised my eyebrows and chuckled. "Dean, did you know that Cannabis has been found to combat cancer cells, as well as help alleviate anxiety and depression among an extensive list of other medical issues? I think you would benefit from it, it would be a healthier alternative to drinking."

I started chuckling, shaking my head, Cas snapping out of his pensive muse, tilting his head and furrowing his brows at me in confusion.

"Dean? What's so funny?"

I shook my head, still chuckling as I patted his shoulder, those baby blues just as innocent and pure as the day I laid eyes on them.

"Nothing," I smiled, Cas still scrutinizing me, as if staring at me long enough would bring the answer to the surface. "We should probably go to bed; Sam and I do have that case to look further into in the morning, that is, if Sam did any research." I chuckled wryly, patting his shoulder one last time before dropping my hand, walking around Cas to the doorway.

"Are you implying that Sam and Jazz copulated and that we should do the same?"

I choked on air, stopping in my tracks, not entirely sure how to respond to that.

"Are you saying you want to?" I asked tentatively, unable to deny that I was damn curious of his answer as I turned back to him, though his back was to me, so I couldn't gauge his reaction.

"It is a curious idea," Cas said finally, turning to face me, his expression as unreadable as ever. "Though I sense that I misinterpreted your meaning?"

"Take it as you want." I said before I could stop myself, and I hastily bit my bottom lip to keep myself from saying anything else stupid.

Cas furrowed his brows, that tiny valley forming between his eyebrows as his head titled slightly.

"So you do wish to copulate?"

"Well..." I flushed, rubbing the back of my neck. "It was one of the highlights of our short relationship." I admitted, a coy smile tugging at my lips as I remembered how Cas tasted and felt, his bare skin flush against mine literally better than heaven itself.

"So was copulating a mainstay in our relationship?" Cas asked, and I bristled, again hating that Cas was implying that sex was all that our previous relationship was, and I was about to snap at him, before I realized, that wasn't what he was saying at all.

Cas was simply just asking, and as Sam had said in so many other words earlier that day, he was just trying to piece together all the pieces he had scattered around in his mind.

I suddenly realized why Cas and I had butted heads all this time, why there had been so much friction between us.

Cas in every damn respect, was still Cas - my Cas - but I had been too self absorbed to see it. I had been too caught up in old memories, and old feelings to appreciate what was - what had always been - right in front of me.

I had been too busy chasing after old ghosts, while Cas himself was the source of the haunting
himself.

Cas was the center of it all, a vacant entity shoved back into a body deprived of its color, of its makeup. Deprived of its *core*.

Cas had been stuck into a body, a home he didn't recognize, but everywhere he looked, saw millions of broken fragments of his life before him scattered like shattered glass, and all this time, he had just been trying to rebuild his glass house.

And I had just left him to do it alone, when I myself was the *only* one who could fix him. *I* was the missing piece, the glue that Cas needed to fix himself, the part that Cas could never seem to live without all these years.

Hell, he'd told me that *all along* in his own words, in a hundred different intricate phrases, and dozens of countless sacrifices.

Castiel sacrificed himself because he *loved* me, because he didn't want to watch me die. Because I was the main reason he had learned to think for himself, the reason he became his own entity, his own beautiful mind. I was the main reason for his transformation, for every damn calamitous thing he fought tooth and nail through. He had every reason, every chance and opportunity to give up, to *leave*. To go back to heaven and find redemption, and everything that had happened between him and I as well as Sam, would've been just a tiny blip in the credits of his very, very long life. A tiny insignificant fragment in his timeline. But no, he *cared*. He *loved*. He strived to better himself and the world around him, and fought to *live*.

Castiel was an angel of the Lord, maybe not now figuratively, but in every sense of my definition, he was an angel.

Castiel loved. He cared, and he empathized. He failed, and he won. He was wise, and had occult knowledge so intricate, I'm sure even Sam envied him at times, but he was also as innocent as a young child when it came to human interactions and customs.

Castiel was pure of heart, and intent; everything he ever did, every breath he ever took, was devoid of malice and manipulative intent.

Castiel would always be an angel to me, because no matter how hard he was beaten, or how tiny he had been crushed, he remained.

He remained as he was, letting nothing crush him beyond repair, letting nothing beat him into cynical disillusion.

Castiel was my definition of an angel, because no matter what happened, he remained steadfast to his mission, his charge.

*Me.*

"I love you." I whispered, the words slipping out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I didn't want to. Didn't care to.

Castiel stared at me, my words obviously not what he had been expecting to hear, and I didn't even remember what his original question was, but I couldn't find it in myself to care. I only cared about Cas, this moment between us, and this calamitous sense that everything had been leading up to this moment. That *this* very moment had been something I was supposed to experience, something that had been set in motion long before I was even an idea, maybe even before Cas was even an idea himself. Maybe it was even destiny, crafted by the works of serendipity.

I felt as if a brand new universe was born the instant Cas' lips twitched into a near imperceptible
smile, his eyes glimmering with some emotion as bright as the sun, and abruptly, I knew. I just knew
that in this fleeting instant, in this tiny insignificant blip of time, that everything was going to be okay.

We would be okay.

"I know." Cas said simply, the tiny smile seemingly plastered to his face. "I always did."

I flushed, at a loss.

I couldn't find my words, anything to say, or even what to do next.

Cas did though. He always did.

Cas took a step forward, and the next thing I knew, he was wrapping me in his arms, pulling me into
a hug.

And I let him.

It took me a second to catch up, but once I had, I was wrapping my arms around him in a viselike
grip, closing my eyes as I buried my face into his shoulder, cradling the back of his head to my
shoulder. He was so warm against me, and I felt whole. Safe. Loved.

"It's okay, Dean." I vaguely heard Cas say, and I felt his hand beginning to rub tentative circles on
my back as his other hand tangled in the fine hairs on the back of my neck, a dim part of my mind
wondering who was sobbing in the room as his hand that was rubbing my back became more
confident. Decided. "It's okay."

"Good morning, Dean."

"Mornin' sunshine." I yawned, stumbling into the kitchen, surprised to see Cas there so early. No one
else was even up yet aside from me I had thought.

"Coffee?" Cas asked, holding up the streaming coffee pot.

"Please." I nodded, sitting heavily in one of the kitchen chairs, rubbing my sleep bleary eyes.

I heard the clink of glass, then the pouring of liquid. Another clink, more liquid pouring, footsteps,
then the chair besides me was being pulled out, a steaming cup of coffee placed in front of me.

"Thanks Cas." I took a breath, wrapping my fingers around the warm cup and looking over at Cas as
he sat down next to me, pouring honey into his coffee.

"How are you feeling?" He asked, stirring his coffee with a spoon, turning to look at me.

"Good." I admitted, which wasn't a lie, the night previous lifting burdens from me that left me weak
afterwards, and still weak in some regards. "How about you? How'd you sleep?"

"I'm good, and I slept well." He blew on his coffee before taking a tentative sip, eyelids fluttering
shut for a moment in obvious pleasure before opening again, and I found it the most endearing thing.  "I enjoyed watching that movie with you last night as well."

"We should do it again then." I suggested, smiling a little at him before I lifted my coffee cup to my lips.

"I'd like that." Cas smiled at the table before looking me in the eyes, blue orbs twinkling like stars.

My chest fluttered at the sight, and I flushed, locked in his eyes.

That critical, hollow empty look Cas had been giving me all this time since he got out of the empty, I now realized was him guarding himself, as that look was all but completely gone after last night. I knew him well enough now though to see the slight reservation in his eyes, but just like typical Cas, once he was in, he was all in, and that was no exception now.

"You seem happier." Cas commented, still gazing into my eyes, and although it wasn't the same way he used to look at me, it was new, and just as beautiful as before, but in its own, new way.

"I am." I said softly, Cas not even needing to specify the moment I finally, finally confessed my feelings for him, in which I cried like a damn idiot afterwards, but of course, Cas didn't judge me for it, and I went to bed feeling like everything was all right in the world for once.

And I guess in a way, it was.

"Good." Cas said softly, and I found myself watching the way his lips formed the word, pink tongue darting out for a moment before I was looking back up into his eyes, Cas' eyes traveling back up to my eyes the same instant.

Oh god to kiss those lips again...

I took a breath, deciding to hell with it, and to go for it.

I slowly leaned incrementally closer, then paused, judging Cas' reaction. He seemed surprised, but didn't lean or look away, his eyes flickering to my lips then to my eyes. Back and forth, back and forth.

Taking that as my green light, I leaned closer, and my heart started racing as I saw Cas leaning closer to me as well; so close, I could feel his breaths on my lips, and smell the coffee in his breath.

God, I bet you taste like it too...

"Good-.. morning." Sam said awkwardly, the stairs creaking as he stopped in his tracks, Cas and I jumping away from each other instantly. "Should I forget having coffee this morning?" He asked with a small smile, his eyes glimmering like Christmas tree lights as he looked between Cas and I.

"No," I sighed, clearing my throat as I leaned back in my chair, Cas turning back around and suddenly finding that downing his coffee was ideal. "So, did you find out anything last night?"

"Some," Sam's feet creaked over the last of the stairs as he walked down them over to the coffee machine, grabbing a cup from the cabinet. "I found out what the L.R. initials on Kara's heart meant."

"Oh yeah?" I asked as I faced back forward.

"Yeah," Sam brushed back his hair, damp from a shower. "They stood for Lauren Ross - Kara's girlfriend - who is now dead as well. I was just told by the coroner that Kara's initials were carved on
her heart the same way as Lauren."

"So, what, is this a misogynistic homophobic ghost?" I scoffed. "That's a new one."

"You're telling me," Sam sighed, pouring himself some coffee, adding some cream to it before sitting across from Cas and I at the table. "But that's all I got. Both of the vic's were squeaky clean; I couldn't dig up any dirt. I guess we'll have to ask people who knew Kara if she had any enemies."

"Do you want to head out after breakfast?" I asked, getting up and walking over to the fridge. "And do you guys want some bacon and eggs?"

"Sure," Sam said as I pulled the eggs out of the cupboard, a chair scraping across the floor in response.

"I'll help you." I jumped as I turned around to find Cas standing right behind me, exhaling.

"Don't do that," I huffed, ignoring Sam's chuckle.

"My apologies," Cas said automatically, gazing at me with this glimmer in his eyes that I couldn't have a hope of naming. "How can I be of assistance?"

"Well," I reached back into the fridge and pulled out the bacon. "You could get a bowl for us to mix the eggs in."

Cas nodded, setting off to his task as I debated on if I should make just enough for the three of us, or for Claire, Rayne, and Jazz as well.

"Sam, what is it?"

I looked up as Cas spoke, finding Sam gazing warmly at us, a twinkle in his eyes that I hadn't seen in a while.

"Nothing." He smiled, shrugging before turning back to his phone, smiling at it and I rolled my eyes. 

_Great. Now Sam was gonna obsess..._

"How many eggs, Dean?" Cas asked, pulling me back to the task at hand.

"Seven I think." I said, which Cas happily handed to me, and I then proceeded to crack and mix the eggs.

I felt the deja vu of that one time when Cas and I made grilled cheese, and the present moment felt so normal, so... _fine_. If I closed my eyes and forgot that Cas was without his memories and that Sam knew about him and I, I could almost believe that I had never lost Cas to the empty, and the secret bliss him and I shared behind closed doors hadn't changed.

_Almost._

"Dean? Are you alright?" Cas brought me back to the present, onyx blue eyes piercing me like sunlight through the trees in the forest.

"Yeah," I smiled a little, pouring some of the mixed eggs in the pan. "I'm fine."
After breakfast with everyone, Sam and I left to drive back to the police station to see if we could dig up anything more on the victims, while Cas took Sam's pickup truck to go get Hotep from the vet, where he had been left at to be looked after and get his yearly shots while Sam, Cas, Jazz and Rayne came to get me in the hospital.

Cas made sure to tell me all about the new things he'd learned about Hotep while I had been gone as we ate breakfast, and his enthusiasm and bright smile damn near made me melt to the chair, as I hadn't seen Cas that happy in nearly two years. The realization only made me feel guiltier than I already did though, knowing that I probably could've seen that smile a lot sooner if only I had been the person Cas needed.

"So," Sam said now, tearing me away from the bittersweet thoughts of Cas. "You and Cas seem to be happy."

"Yeah, we're good." I said simply, keeping my eyes on the road.

"Sorry I interrupted this morning." He chuckled, and I flushed as I remembered me and Cas' almost kiss.

"Shut up Sam.." I muttered, Sam bursting out laughing.

"Fine, fine," he says, taking a breath, still snickering. "But really, you guys are okay?"

"Yes, we talked." I sighed, wishing Sam would drop the subject as I turned down a street.

"And?" Sam prodded.

"And nothing. We just decided to take things slow I guess." I shrugged.

"You 'guess'?"

"Mind your own damn business Sam." I grumbled as he chuckled.

"Okay, okay," Sam chuckles as I pulled up to the police station, parking the car. "I'm just happy for you tw-" he broke off as five police officers ran out of the building, rushing towards their vehicles. "What's going on?"

"Let's find out.." I said as I got out of the car, rushing over to Alaina, the kind cop that had helped Sam and I yesterday. "Alaina, what's going on?"

"There's just been another murder." She said hastily, her auburn hair shining in the sunlight. "A male this time. You can follow us there."

I nodded, turning around and jogging back to the impala, where Sam stood waiting for me.

"What's going on?" He asked as I opened the door to the impala.

"Another murder, a guy this time." I hastily explained as I got in the car, Sam following my lead.

"Guess we can scratch off misogynistic, homophobic ghost." Sam sighed as I threw the car in reverse, hastily driving after the two cop cars leaving the parking lot.

"Seem's like." I sighed. "Maybe it'll help us find a pattern as well."

"Maybe," Sam agreed, quickly buckling his seatbelt.
Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the crime scene, a small but quaint house on the outskirts of town, a guy in the driveway crying as Alaina was seemingly trying to comfort him.

"Awesome.." I muttered as Sam and I got out of the Impala, closing the doors.

We walked up the drive towards the man and Alaina caught sight of us as we walked up and came over to us after she made her excuses to the distraught man.

"The vic is twenty-eight year old Westley Carnes," Alaina explained in a low voice, looking between Sam and I. "He was killed same as the other vic's - heart ripped out with initials on them - which we already found a match for."

"Whose are they?" I kept my voice low, glancing over at the honey blonde guy behind her still sobbing uncontrollably.

"His fiance's, Eli Perry. That's him behind us," Alaina nodded over to the man sobbing behind us, her face drawn and tight with sympathy. "He came home from work and found his body."

I nodded, reaching into my suit jacket pocket to retrieve my fed badge, excusing Sam and I from Alaina before we walked over to Eli.

"Excuse me sir-?" Sam and I held up our badges for Eli, his bloodshot eyes turning to look at us, and I was taken aback at the sheer emptiness in his eyes, his gaze the same that I had seen in the mirror everyday for nearly two years now.

"We're very sorry for your loss," Sam said when I couldn't continue, the look in Eli's eyes too much for me to handle. "We would just like to ask you a few questions."

"Do I have to? I need to make some calls-" Eli choked out, and I took a breath trying to steady myself.

"It'll help us find the bastard that killed your fiancé." I said before Sam could speak, and I ignored the glance he threw at me in response.

Eli took a breath, seemingly steeling himself as he wiped his eyes, crossing his arms.

"What, uh, what do you need to know?" He sniffed.

"Well, did your fiancé have any enemies?" I asked.

"No, Westley was the kindest person in the world." Eli said softly, barely able to even look Sam and I in the eye. "I can't think of any reason someone would want to do this." His voice cracked, and I found it harder to keep myself together.

"Okay, thank you for your time." I said, Eli nodding and walking off.

"You alright?" Sam asked softly as we started walking towards the house to check out the crime scene.

"M'fine Sam." I muttered, opening the front door and walking inside the house with Sam, the house swarming with cops.

We walked into the kitchen, a bloody cloth laid over Westley's body, another smaller cloth draped over a smaller mound, the heart, I was assuming. I took the opportunity to look at the body and the heart for any extra clues while Sam talked to Alaina again. I looked for sulfur too just in case, as well
as anything else for other clues, but nothing. The scene was just as baffling as the last two deaths with Lauren and Kara. The only thing clue that we had now, was that this ghost was homophobic, but why?

I checked the entire kitchen for a hex bag, but to no avail, not even finding anything out of the ordinary. I had just finished my thorough search as Sam walked back up to me as he had finished his chat with Alaina.

"Anything?" He asked in a low voice as we started walking back towards the front door.

"Nothing. No hex bags, sulfur, or weird objects. The only thing we have to go on is that this ghost is a homophobic asshole."

Sam said nothing until we were outside and out of earshot of all the cops, opening the passenger door to the impala.

"You know, maybe you should sit this case out.." He suggested slowly.

I stopped in my tracks, rolling my eyes.

"Sam, you know my situation isn't exactly cut n' dry." I remarked dryly.

"I know, but Cas is human now, and I'm pretty sure that's good enough for this ghost." Sam said with that damn constipated look of his.

"We don't even know the motive yet, Sam. I'm sure if it wanted to come after me, it would've already." I sighed as I got in the impala, Sam following my lead and shutting his door as I started the car.

"Maybe, but I still think you should sit this out."

"Hell no!" I exclaimed. "If using myself as bait stops this, then I'm doing it. Now, I'm gonna stop at the police station and I'm going to take another look at at the vic's files, while you do a little digging online to see if you can find some other dirt and watch Eli."

"What am I digging for?" Sam asked, the two of us sitting in the car.

"Anything! I don't care if you have to hack into their damn Facebooks, just find the link between the three of them or Eli is next!" I yelled, a tense silence falling over the car.

"Okay, I'll call you if I find anything." Sam said softly, grabbing his laptop from the back seat and getting out of the car, shutting the door behind him.

I exhaled as Sam got out of the car, and I instantly felt a little guilty for yelling at him as I started driving away.

But I knew exactly how Eli felt, that huge, damn gaping hole. That feeling that your whole world had just imploded on itself, and all you had left to do now was fall, fall, fall.

I knew far too well how that felt, and I was going to do my damnest to make sure no one else ever knew what that felt like.
I went through all the vic's files top to bottom, reading and rereading until I started questioning the spelling of multiple words, but nothing availed itself.

There was just no connection to the vic's. They all had different friends, families, and jobs. They weren't close in age, and not even close ethnicity wise. They may as well have lived on different planets.

And since there was no found murder weapon at any of the scenes, there was nothing to examine for further clues aside from the vic's bodies that didn't hold any other clues aside from the ones we already knew.

I sighed, dropping my head in my hands, utterly stumped and frustrated.

Where was the connection? There was always one, so why couldn't we find it now and figure out who homophobic Casper was?

I jumped as my phone rang, Sam's name flashing across my screen, and I hastily answered it.

"I hope you got somethin', 'cause I got bupkis." I sighed into the phone.

"I think I found our ghost and the motive." Sam said, and I grinned.

"I'm listening," I said as I leaned back in the office chair I was sitting in.

"I did some digging, and I found that Kara had been engaged to a guy named Benjamin Cross, but, get this, Kara called the whole thing off when she ended up falling in love with her best friend that was also her Maid of Honor, Lauren."

"So did Westley or Eli ditch someone for each other?" I asked.

"Sort of. From what I was able to gather, Westley and Eli were friends for a while, but a few weeks after Westley broke up with his girlfriend, he and Eli started dating."

"Well, look at you, Batman." I chuckled, typing Benjamin's name into the computer and looking him up. "Did you find out where our Jacob Black is buried?"

"Did you just-"

"Shut up." I muttered, waiting for the computer to load the results. "At least I'm not a creep that hacked into someone's Facebooks."

I grinned as I heard Sam's heavy sigh on the phone at that.

"I did, but I can't figure out how he's killing people, because his grave is about an hour from here, and we didn't find any objects from the crime scene that he could've attached himself to."

"Huh," I muttered as I read over his obituary report in the police database. "Well, I found out how he died. Dude weighed almost three hundred pounds and it seemed after Kara dumped him, he ate a few too many fried foods and had a heart attack from a blocked artery."

"That explains why he rips out the hearts," Sam mused. "Because in a way, Kara ripped his out."

"Good times," I sighed, chewing on my bottom lip. "Well, then how's he gettin' around? Burning his
bones might not be enough at this point if he's attached himself to something else."

"I don't know- Wait, I think I got something.." Sam went quiet over the phone as I closed my search windows on the computer I was borrowing at the police station.

"What is it?" I asked, pushing my chair in, nodding to Alaina as I made my way out of the police station.

"There's some guy knocking at Eli's door.. Eli just answered, though I can't tell if he knows him or not."

I vaguely heard Sam cock his pistol over the line as I walked outside the police station, the door hissing shut behind me.

"Well, I'm heading over to you either way." I said as I walked towards the impala. "Should I pick up dinner?"

"Yeah- wait, shit, the guy is attacking Eli!" Sam exclaimed, the line going dead, and I swore, running to the car, scrambling to get inside.

I jammed the key into the ignition, the tires squealing as I backed out of the parking space, damn near driving over the sidewalk in my haste to get back on the road. I prayed that Sam had been able to handle the situation and that we would be able to save Eli and other potential lives in the future.

Nine minutes and a few close calls later, I made it to the house, the tires and brakes squealing as I stopped in front of Eli's house, running up the drive as I pulled out my pistol, taking it off safety subconsciously, the action as engrained into me as breathing now.

The house was deathly silent, and I started feeling cold, creeping through the house as quietly as possible, but Sam or Eli were nowhere in sight.

"Sam..?" I hissed, stalking into the kitchen, which had obviously been cleaned, but there was still a maroon stain on the center of the floor from Westley's blood.

I heard a footstep to my left, and I whirled around, damn near about to pull the trigger before I gasped to see a bleak looking Sam walking towards me.

"They're both dead." He said dully, and I put my gun on safety, tucking back in the waistband of my fed suit dress pants.

"What?" I asked, hating that look in Sam's eye. That placid and empty look near bordering cynical when we couldn't save our innocent victim. It never failed to make me ache for Sam, hating that he had to witness such cruel and evil deaths. Sam deserved far better, but I knew as well as he that hunters never got 'better'.

"I came in right as our John Doe killed Eli, and then the ghost turned around and killed the vessel before he was bungied back to his grave after I burned a letter in our John Doe's pocket written by Kara to Benjamin." Sam said with a heavy sigh, the one that I knew too well.

It didn't matter that him and I had been slashing and shooting and killing things since we were practically children, the death of an innocent was never an easy thing to get over, even after all this time. It had been a life in your hands. A mind. A soul. A person. Even if they didn't consciously know that you were trying to protect them - like Eli - it didn't ease the weight off of your chest. You had taken that responsibility - that life - in your hands. You had chosen to avenge the others you couldn't save, and prevent others from being killed out of cold blood. And when you failed... You
I didn’t just fail at your mission and yourself, you failed your charge, that life you had taken into your hands. You failed at one of the most precious and important things you could ever take on, and it was never an easy weight to bear, even after getting used to its brutal blows after all these long, long years.

I took a breath, patting Sam's shoulder reassuringly as I pulled out my phone.

"Go get in the car, I'll be there in a minute." I said, Sam nodding wearily, trudging past me with heavy feet as I dialed nine one-one.

"Hi, I'd like to report a murder and a suicide on Van street, at the address of ten twelve. My name? Yeah, my name is-" I hung up, tucking my phone back in my pocket, wiping me and Sam's fingerprints off of the front doorknob before I walked back to the impala, quickly getting inside, Sam already there. "You alright Sammy?" I asked softly as I started the Impala.

"I'm fine." He said, and though I knew he was lying, I also knew there was no point in pushing the subject. There was nothing I could do anyways.

"Why don't we salt and burn some bones then?" I asked as I started driving off down the road, looking over at Sam with a small smile, hoping to at least rally him up.

"Yeah, I'll find the address of the cemetery where he's buried, and you should probably call the bunker to let them know that we'll be coming home later than expected." Sam suggested as he grabbed his laptop from the backseat.

I nodded, pulling out my phone and calling the one person I hadn't been able to push out of my mind all day.

"Hello?" Cas answered his phone after the first ring.

"Hey Cas," I smiled as I heard his voice. "Listen buddy, I just wanted to check in and let you and the girls know that Sam and I will be getting home late."

"Why? Is everything alright, Dean?"

"Sorta," I glanced over at Sam, his gloomy face pale in the light from his laptop. I looked back at the road, getting on the freeway. "We figured out who our ghost is, so we're on our way to go burn the bones."

"Where?"

"'Bout an hour from here, Sam is getting the address now." I explained, putting my phone on speaker as Sam looked over at me. "You're on speaker now, Cas."

"Hi Cas." Sam said, a small smile on his face as he greeted him. "Oh, I got the address."

"Hello Sam, and what is it?" Cas asked, and I heard a car door shut over the call.

"Cas, what are you doing?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"I'm coming to help." He said as the sound of a car engine flared over the phone.

"Hell no, you need to stay!" I exclaimed, and I could see Sam looking at me out of my peripheral vision.

"Why? I want to help."
"Because, this ghost is going after LGBT couples and I want you safe! Shut up Sam!" I warned him, shooting him a glare as he smiled a shit eating grin.

"I thought you said your situation wasn't exactly, 'cut n' dry'?" Sam smirked and I was about ready to sock him.

"I don't understand..." Cas said slowly over the phone, and I sighed in exasperation.

"Sam, shut up. Cas, stay at the bunker. You're safer there." I commanded, rolling my eyes at Sam.

"No. Dean, I want to help."

"Cas, you'll be helping by staying." I begged, hoping for the love of God that the stubborn son of a bitch would stay.

There was a small silence over the phone as Sam was silently snickering beside me.

"Then shouldn't Sam be handling this case on his own? Last I recalled, you are my boyfriend." I internally swore, chewing on my bottom lip in vexation, ignoring Sam's wide grin. "I believe I used the term correctly..."

"Cas." I sighed, but he barreled on before I could say another word.

"No, I'm coming. Sam, what is the address?"

"The cemetery name is Peachgrove and it's on Jackson Street an hour out from the town we were investigating." Sam informed him before I could stop him.

"Thank you Sam. I will meet you both there." Cas ended the call before I could try and convince him to stay home, Sam merely smiling a little as he stared at me.

I stuffed my phone in my pocket, glaring over at Sam.

"Sam, what the hell was that?"

"I'm doing you a favor." Sam said unapologetically.

"A favor? How the hell is throwing Cas in the line of fire doing me a favor?!" I roared, debating on pulling the car over and letting Sam know exactly how I felt about his little 'favor'.

"Calm down Dean," Sam sighed, as if telling me that was the magic defusing button. "For one, I'm not putting Cas in the line of fire."

"How?" I grumbled.

"Did you forget the ghost's motive? Cas has never even been in a real relationship with anyone but you, and you didn't exactly leave Lisa for him either..." He pointed out.

I took a breath, a part of the anxiety I felt dissipating.

"Not to mention I have her blessing for being with Cas." I mused aloud, remembering taking the stairway to heaven with Cas almost two years ago.

"What?" Sam asked in confusion.

"Oh," I chuckled, forgetting that I had never told Sam about it. "Back when Cas and I took that road
trip last year to go get his grace, he uh, took me to Ben and Lisa's shared heaven to give me closure."

"He did?" Sam asked, and although I was focused on driving, I didn't have to look at him to know that he had that dewy-eyed smile on his face.

"Yes," I grumbled, more than ready to move on from the topic, but Sam continued.

"How was she?" He asked softly. "Was she-?"

"Pissed that I got her and Ben killed?" I finished for him, and despite having moved on from the incident, that flush of pain and slight guilt every time I thought of them was something that would never go away, I knew.

"Dean-"

"She wasn't," I cut him off before I could hear the 'it wasn't your fault'. "She told me that Nira told them before she uh- she said that she had been planning it for months and that it was unavoidable. She also figured out Cas and I were uh, together," I flushed at the phrase. "And she gave me her blessing for us to be together."

"Really? How'd she find out?" Sam asked curiously.

"Does it matter?" I groused, glancing over at Sam, who was giving me his classic constipated bitch faces. I sighed, focusing back on the road. "Cas was wearing my AC/DC hoodie and she recognized it."

"Aw, how cute." Sam cooed and I scowled.

"I will pull this car over and punch you." I threatened, Sam merely laughing at that. "Either way, I still don't like how you let Cas get involved."

"Dean," Sam said my name long and slow, and I braced myself, knowing it was the predecessor to a long winded emotional talk. "I think this'll be good for you."

"How?" I snapped.

"When's the last time you and Cas did a hunt together?"

I remembered clearly. The last time he and I had done anything remotely close to a hunt was that week before I lost him. I quickly pushed the thoughts away and focused on the road.

"The week before he got stuck in the Empty." I said softly.

"Exactly, and I think you need to see that Cas can handle himself. He was hunting with me while you were gone those what, two months? But either way, I noticed how you always get on edge whenever I mention Cas hunting, and I think you need this." I wanted to argue with him, but now that he had brought the subject to my attention, I realized that the son of a bitch was right. The thought of Cas hunting or anywhere near danger sent wicked spasms of needles into my stomach. I didn't like the idea one bit and I still wanted to call him back and fight on getting him to turn around. But on another hand, the logical part of me knew this endeavor was probably a healthy experience for me.

But who said it had to happen?

"What are you doing?" Sam asked as I put the pedal to the medal, thanking Chuck that the highway
we were on was mostly old farmland, not a place you'd see a cop regularly.

"Getting to the cemetery before the son of a bitch kills someone else." I muttered.

Sam sighed in response to that, and in such a way, I knew that he had picked up on my ruse. But he said nothing, letting me tear down the highway towards our destination.


A little less than an hour later, Sam and I arrived at the cemetery, and I was pleased to see that Sam's truck wasn't there yet, which meant Cas wasn't here yet.

I was in a hurry to grab the salt and shovels, getting aggravated that Sam was dragging ass on looking for Benjamin's grave. I gave up on letting Sam try to find it, shoving a shovel at him and storming off, finding Benjamin's grave, only it was already half dug out, Cas almost thigh deep into the dirt.

"Oh, hello Dean, Sam." Cas paused, chest heaving at he looked up at us. "I'm glad you're here-"

"How long have you been here?" I interrupted, and I heard Sam behind me stopping as he caught up.

Cas frowned.

"Only ten minutes- Dean, are you alright? You look stressed."

"I'm fine." I scowled, ignoring Sam's soft snicker behind me as I dropped our duffle bag to the ground. "Let's just get it done."

"I'll keep watch." Sam said, walking off towards this large oak tree next to a cluster of headstones.

I sighed, rolling my eyes as I lowered myself into the hole Cas had started, grabbing my shovel and starting to dig.

We stayed that way for several minutes, Cas and I digging, while Sam leaned against the oak tree keeping watch, just out of hearing distance. The only sounds to hear were me and Cas' labored breaths, the shovels spearing the dirt, then the dirt *plopping* onto the grass. If I had time to really notice, I'd realize that it was a particularly nice night. The crickets sang softly, and a cool breeze blew through the late spring air, providing sweet, sweet relief to my sweat soaked skin.

"Dean?" Cas finally said softly, the two of us nearly shoulder deep into the ground now. "You don't want me here, do you?"

I faltered in my pace, yet again stuck with how blindingly observant Cas was.

I knew there was no point in lying to him, he'd just find me out someway like he always did.

"No." I admitted, glancing briefly at him as I tossed a shovel full of dirt over the side of the grave, the smell of earth and that slight must that decaying flesh always gave filling my nose.
"Why?" No anger, no offense or malice in his voice. Nothing. Just purely asking me because he wanted to know what was going through my mind.

"Well..." Now being put on the spot and so gently, I couldn't let myself lie. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Because of what happened?" Cas clarified - still keeping his voice low so Sam couldn't hear - while he slowed his work to look at me.

"Yes." I said softly, unable to look at him as I shoved my shovel a bit too aggressively into the dirt as I remembered how I had failed him.

"Dean, you have to stop."

"Stop what?" I grumbled, still refusing to look at him.

He didn't answer, and he stopped helping, leaving me to shovel the last couple bits of dirt, my shovel hitting the casket now.

"Cas?" I furrowed my brow, taking the opportunity to take a breath, leaning on my shovel. But as I looked up at Cas, my stomach plummeted.

He was glaring at me as if I had killed someone close to him with my bare hands, black ooze dripping down his cheek from his eyes.

_Ectoplasm..._

_But how?

"Cas..." I said carefully, raising my hands. "This isn't you."

"You killed Astaroth!

_Astaroth?

I didn't have time to ponder the name before Cas was lunging at me, fully prepared to bash my skull in with the shovel.

"Cas!" I yelled, barely getting the handle of my shovel up in time to block his attack, Cas hearing none of my pleas.

"You killed him, Winchester." Cas spat, though his voice sounded different... Familiar somehow... but I couldn't place where I'd heard it.

I stumbled backwards with the force of Cas' blow, my back hitting a dirt wall.

"Sam-!" I yelled, grunting as I tried pushing Cas back, his eyes nearly black with rage and malevolence, fighting against me as if he was possessed.

Cas suddenly swung at my legs, and I gasped as the metal of the shovel smashed into my left calf, unprepared to block it and I received the full force of the blow.

I crumbled to the ground in agony, realizing with startling clarity that I couldn't save myself now...

_I deserve this..._
Just as Cas was about to slam the shovel into my skull, Sam came to my aid, yanking the shovel away from a surprised Cas, giving me enough time to scramble out of the hole and to higher ground.

It was painful yanking myself up onto the grass, my calf absolutely throbbing. I rolled on my side, trying to regain some semblance as I watched Sam wrestle the shovel away from Cas, who roared in anger in response. Sam prepared himself to take on Cas, and I took it as my opportunity to get to work on burning some bones, but as soon as I sat up, Cas whipped around to glare at me. The pure hatred and bitterness in his face was so severe and spiteful, it caught me off guard, the absolute evil in his face something that looked like true sin on his usual pure, gentle face.

"You son of a bitch.." I glowered, wanting to rip the ghost apart for making Cas look like a monster.

As if hearing me, the next thing I knew, Cas was on top of me, slamming me to the ground with superhuman strength. He pinned me down with the weight of his body, his fists pounding into my face with brutal continuation. I tried my best to block his attacks, refusing to hurt Cas at all. If I could just give Sam enough time to burn the bones... Then this would be over.

The pain seemed to drag on, and Cas actually grabbed my wrists, pinning them above my head so I could no longer block his attacks, Cas making use of his left fist to rain pain down on my face. I could feel my consciousness begin to ebb and distort, blackness beginning to trickle into my vision.

"Cas.. Please.." I begged again, spitting blood, too weak now to try wrenching my fists from his iron grasp.

I coughed for air, noticing that his punches had relented, as did the pressure of his body on mine.

"Dean?"

I heard a click, then a *floof*, yellow light rising from Benjamin's grave beyond Cas' shoulder.

I exhaled, Cas' body jerking and wrenching around as Benjamin's ghost was ripped from his body, Cas falling limp on top of me with little grace.

I huffed as the wind was partially knocked out of me when Cas slammed down on my chest, but I was too weak from the pain to move him.

"Dean?" I vaguely heard Sam, his voice completely drowning out as I felt Cas stir on top of me, lifting his head to look at me, his eyes widening.

"Dean?" He exclaimed, his blue eyes widening in bewilderment and panic. "How did I get here? Why are you bleeding?"

I couldn't speak, just on the cusp of blacking out, Cas' bright blue onyx eyes the only thing keeping me from going under.

I mustered up the last of the strength I had to assure him that it wasn't his fault, when his two fingers pressed to my forehead, tingly warmth flooding through me as he healed me.

I gasped once I felt that last bit of my broken skin reform, blinking in shock.

"Cas? How did you-"

I was shut up as Cas barreled on. He quickly leaned back to look around wildly, his eyes darting everywhere wildly as he remained sitting on my hips.
"Dean, what's going on? How did I get here?" He noticed a shocked Sam standing dumbfounded off to the side, the flames from Benjamin's grave painting eerie shadows on his face. "How am I alive?"

"D-don't you remember?" I asked tentatively, frozen underneath him, still trying to wonder how he had healed me when we had long since determined he had lost his grace.

He turned his gaze back to me sharply, his eyes wide and utterly confused, but there was no hesitance like there was the day Nira pulled him out of The Empty.

"Last I recall, I was hiding out in the cave I sought shelter in every night.. Dean, how did I get here?"

"Nira pulled you out... Nearly six months ago..." I said slowly. "Cas, what's going on..?"

"Dean, I don't recollect any of that," he frowned, gazing down at me, his eyes roving all over my face like he was seeing it for the first time. Then suddenly, a small smile rose on his face. "Dean, you're alive."

I was in shock as he reached up to cup my face with his hand, and I was even more stunned to see he was crying, tears rushing down his cheeks and washing the ectoplasm off of his face, his tears dripping onto my face as he stared at me with such adoration and love I wanted to cry myself.

Then it suddenly hit me.

He was looking at me the way pre-empty Cas did.

*The way my Cas had...*

"I've thought about you everyday," Cas whispered, his voice broken and soft. "There was never a moment I didn't." He trailed his finger down my cheek, caressing me as if I was a precious artifact. "I wanted to remember every detail about you. Your voice, your hair, your soul... That one freckle that's larger than all the rest right here," he touched the freckle he had engrained into his mind, smiling warmly at it, as if he was seeing an old friend. I was frozen, my mouth absolutely dry as he dragged his eyes back to mine, eyes so blue. "But most of all, I wanted to be able to recall the exact shade of your eyes..." He whispered, cupping my cheek as he gazed into my eyes, his stare so deep and fervid, I didn't even realize I had begun crying myself until his thumb wiped my tear away. "Dean... my memories didn't do them justice..."

I lost it then, so bewildered and overwhelmed with Cas' belated response to being reunited, but one word triggered inside my emotion saturated mind.

"You remember?" I choked out, hardly able to get the words out for fear this was a cruelly vivid dream.

Maybe I was still lying on my bed suffering from dementia and those wickedly vivid dreams I had when I first escaped The Empty. *Maybe I never recovered at all...*

Cas frowned, cocking his head to the side, left brow rising.

"Of course, Dean, why wouldn't I remember? It takes eons Earth time for an angel to loose its mind in The Empty."

"Wait, you remember?" Sam exclaimed, breaking the spell that had fallen over Cas and I, Cas breaking his gaze from mine to look over at Sam.

"Yes. I sense I am missing something?" He mused aloud, looking back at me.
"Damn straight.." I muttered, the joy from the moment starting to wear off, wariness quickly replacing it. "Cas, I think we need to test you."

Cas furrowed his brows at me in slight confusion, sitting up slightly.

"You think it's not me?" He asked bluntly, and I hated the clear pain in his eyes at that.

"I-I don't know..." I said slowly, reaching up to cup his forearms with my hands, both to touch him, and to be prepared should he decided to turn on me. "The last six months, we thought you had lost both your memory and your grace..."

"What?" Cas tilted his head, furrowing his brow in that utterly adorable way of his.

"Exactly... So if you could let us just test you..."

"Of course." Cas nodded, moving off of me and letting his hands slide to mine as he hauled me up with him, his hands holding mine tightly, but he quickly released them as he remembered Sam as he walked up. "Oh.. Dean I didn't mean-"

"He knows." I interrupted him as Sam smiled sheepishly as he pulled out his silver knife.

"He does?" Cas exclaimed, and the joy in his voice made me smile, though my stomach twisted as I offered Cas' left wrist up for Sam. "You know Sam?"

"Yes, I do, and I approve." Sam chuckled, wincing as he quickly made a little cut to the inside of his wrist, though nothing happened to my relief.

Cas' blissful smile in response to that made me warm, as did his smile at me when he looked over at me.

"You see Dean, I was right about Sam approving."  

"Yes you were." I nodded, unable to help myself from smiling at him back like an idiot, despite how shady the situation was.

"We have holy water in the trunk." Sam said, glancing over at Benjamin's grave, the flames almost dead. "Dean, why don't you take Cas and finish testing him while I finish this up?"

"Yeah," I nodded, letting Cas trail his hand down to intertwine with mine. "We'll wait there for you."

"No funny business." Sam teased, though I didn't need to be Batman to see the warning in his eye at that.

I nodded, Sam handing me the two shovels we kept in the trunk and Cas the duffle bag.

"We'll see you in a bit." I said, regrettably having to let go of Cas' hand to hold the two shovels.

Sam nodded, beginning to push the dirt back into Benjamin's grave as Cas and I silently walked back to the Impala.

I hardly knew what to think. **Had being ghost possessed flipped Cas' memory and mojo switch in his brain? And who the hell was Astaroth? I sure as hell never heard the name before...**

We made it back to the car a few moments later, Cas handing me the duffle bag after I put the shovels back into the car.
"Dean? Are you alright?" Cas asked softly as I stuffed the duffle bag into the trunk. "You seem different..."

I heaved a breath, pulling out our flask of holy water, gesturing to Cas, in which he lifted his arm up to me. I poured the water over the small cut Sam had made to both test and clean it. Nothing happened to my relief and slight worry. So if Cas wasn't a demon or a shapeshifter or anything allergic to silver, then what the hell was going on?

"Well, up until twenty minutes ago, I was under the impression that your vacation in The Empty completely wiped your hard drive." I sighed, putting the flask back in the trunk and grabbing our med kit, pulling out a bandage to wrap around Cas' wrist. I knew he didn't need it, but I felt better doing it, and he always let me.

Cas furrowed his brow, thinking hard to himself. "Why don't I remember any of it?"

"You know as much as me." I sighed, wrapping the bandage over Cas' cut and over his wrist. "Who's Astaroth?"

"A very powerful demon that was a duke of hell in the shape of a corrupted and fowl angel, but I haven't heard his name in ages. I believe he's dead, in fact." I saw him tilt his head at me out of my peripheral vision as I finished wrapping the bandage. "Why?"

"Nothing." I muttered, finishing wrapping his cut up, then grabbing a wipe from the med kit and wiping the last of the ectoplasm off of his face.

"Dean." Cas said my name in a warning tone, and I sighed, crumbling up the dirty wipe, putting it back in med kit, putting it away.

"When you got ghost possessed, you were going on about how I killed him." I muttered as I closed the trunk and locked it.

Cas furrowed his brows in confusion.

"How could you have when you don't even know who he is?"

"You're telling me..." I sighed, looking up as Sam walked up.

"We're all clear." Sam reported as he walked up. "We should head out."

I nodded, closing the trunk. "How you wanna do this?"

"I'll drive my car back. You take the Impala and Cas." Sam said, and though it was too dim to really make out his facial features, his body posture said it all. He didn't like the idea of me being alone with bipolar Cas, but he didn't like the idea of giving him a car to go off on his own in even more. "We'll try and figure this out back at the bunker."

"Sounds good. We'll see you there." I agreed, not giving up Sam's ruse that I completely agreed with, Sam nodding and walking off to go find his truck. "Ready to go Cas?" I asked as I pulled my keys out of my back pocket.

"Yes." He nodded, turning to go to the passenger door.

I took a breath as he got in the car, and the squeaking of the door was loud in the quiet, the door closing even louder.
While a part of me was wary and scared of who the hell I had riding shotgun with me for the next two hour drive home, a part of me wasn't. Cas would never hurt me of his own volition. Every time he ever had, he had been under the influence of something. Well, except that one time he let my ass have it when I wanted to give into Micheal, but although I would never admit it, I deserved it.

But Cas was back... *My Cas...*

I hated thinking of him that way now that me and... *Amnesia* Cas, had finally made amends.

Hell, even begun to maybe fall into something more...

*And now he didn't even remember that..?*

*It felt like the last six months were starting all over again...*

Taking a breath, I walked around the car to open the door, but not before I muttered:

"I'm gonna get whiplash..."
Now That I'm Real, How Does it Feel?

Thirteen

After taking a brief moment to collect and mentally prepare myself, I opened the impala, the familiar squeak of the door opening comforting to me as I got inside the car.

"Dean, what are these?"

I shut the door, looking over at Cas, his fingers threading slowly through dozens of colorful bar napkins from the glove compartment; dozens of phone numbers and women's names littered over them all. They spilled all over Cas' lap, and still more were stuffed inside the glove compartment, like physical fragments of a broken heart from that time.

The worst part though, was seeing the pure anguish and the obvious sense of betrayal on his face as he sorted through all the napkins with enervated passion, as if doing the mere act of touching them was breaking him.

I had honestly forgotten about their existence, hadn't even touched the glovebox since the last day I went to a bar and even touched alcohol, but now... never had I regretted something I had done more than then.

"I-I was looking for your Aerosmith, The Yardbirds and Led Zeppelin cassette tapes since they weren't with the others and I looked in there-" Cas stopped, shoving them all back inside with the desperate fever a person displays right before they're about to shatter into sobs.

"Cas, Cas-" I reached out, grabbing his wrists, stopping him, Cas freezing instantly at the contact, staring at my hands as if he was remembering what they were.

"What don't I remember...?" Cas whispered, his voice so choked and broken, I felt myself cracking as I heard it. I was frozen as he turned to look at me, his eyes so wide in bewilderment and distress, it felt like the very world around us was shattering with his agony. "What have I done to you?"

I couldn't speak, all I could do was stare at him and gape like a fish out of water, the pronounced grief in his voice too much for me to bear.

"Dean, did you move on from me?" He went on, his voice high with emotion and shaky, but outwardly, he seemed to acquiesce his seeming idea of his fate. "Was I not what you wanted?"

"No, no, no, Cas. God, no." I said in a rush, subconsciously pulling his hands closer to me. "Never, I only want you. It's just... a lot has happened.."

Cas seemed to relax at this, the tension in his shoulders easing, though the grief on his face didn't fade.

"What happened?" He asked softly, moving closer to me, tightening his grip on my hands.

"I'll tell you everything, but we should probably start getting a move on before Sam starts worrying." I said, holding his hands just as tightly back, though I didn't move.

"Okay." Cas said softly, his gaze locked in mine, not moving at all either. "Dean, I love you." Cas said softly in the comfortable silence that has fallen between us, his eyes glimmering like a child's when it saw something beyond its measure.
"Okay, okay." I chuckled, smiling like a damn idiot at the words and I released his hands to slide back over to the steering wheel. I knew I shouldn't let myself become too caught up in Cas since we still didn't know what the hell the deal was, but damn it, how could I help it when he was looking at me that way?

When he said that he loved me?

"So, how did I get out?" Cas asked as I started the car, and I could feel his gaze on me as I put the car in gear.

"Nira got you out." I said, turning the radio down before I started driving down the gravel road.

"But I thought we had captured her." Cas said in confusion, and I couldn't help but feel warm when he reached out to hold my right hand when I rested it on my lap.

"She escaped, I don't know how, but she did." I took a breath, intertwining my fingers with his.

Gonna enjoy this while I can...

"So this is what happened-"

And with that, I delved into everything that had happened, starting from the moment Cas had dispelled me from The Empty. He listened silently as I explained my temporary dementia and amnesia afterwards, his fingers tightening slightly around mine as I told him about my dreams and how I got my memories back. I could hear his stuttering breaths as I relayed the year I searched for him, and I could sense his disapproval when after some demanding from him, I told him about how I had tortured Lester for information to find him, much to his obvious displeasure, but understanding. He said that he wanted to personally thank Rayne for being my rock during his absence, and her role after, and his fingers squeezed so tightly around mine that the blood stopped flowing when I told him about my drunken holiday I had taken after our fall out. It pained me relaying nearly everything, as I didn't need to see Cas to know that he was in agony over the events that had unfolded until this point. I heard his pain manifesting itself in his soft, but choked wet breaths, as if he was sobbing within. I felt his spite and fury in the way he clutched my hand the way a woman clutches her lover's hand when in labor. But even more than that, I could sense even just sitting next to him his fury, grief, and agony for the pain and lost time we'd had in a sense.

Hell, it seemed like lost time between us was an inescapable fiend in our relationship.

Once I was done retelling the story and answering the few questions Cas had, we were about ten minutes from home, and Cas had been sitting in dumbstruck silence for the last five minutes already, processing as I myself still was.

"Dean..." He said finally, his voice soft and labored with grief. "I'm so sorry..

"S'not your fault," I muttered, stopping at a stoplight as it turned red. "We'll get it sorted out."

"But it was," he disagreed, and I looked over to see that he was already looking at me, his grief stricken face maroon in the light of the stoplight. "It was me... I called you a drunk and insinuated other horrible things that I nearly got you killed of because of it and I-

"Cas, stop." I commanded, shooting him a glance as I waited for the light to turn green, the street empty due to the late hour.

"But I'm responsible, I must-"
"Cas, please." I sighed, his insatiable desire for penance wounding me probably even more than what had unfolded over the last six months.

He stopped, seemingly catching onto my woe, and I didn't need to look at him as I continued driving on to know that he was gazing at me.

"I'm sorry."

"I swear, if I hear that word one more time.." I grumbled, shaking my head as I rested my hand on the steering wheel.

"I apologize." I could hear the smile in his voice, the small grin on his face confirming itself to me as I glanced over at him with a smile of my own.

"You son of a bitch." I chuckled, and I could hear the soft huff of amusement Cas gave in response.

"I love you."

"You never tire of saying that, do you?" I muttered, and Cas' light chuckle was music to my ears.

"Never." He vowed, his eyes twinkling like sea glass in the glow under the streetlights.

I smiled, unable to help myself, even knowing I should have my guard up.

We sat in comfortable silence on the last bit home, Cas' hand resting on my thigh when our hands became too clammy to hold awhile back, but he never stopped touching me in some way, and I didn't want him to stop.

Hell, I didn't give a damn if he was the spawn of Satan himself; I didn't care that I should have my guard up higher than a king's guard for a queen. he was Cas, and that was never going to change, despite the circumstances.

"Dean-" Cas suddenly said as I was driving the Impala into the garage after Sam, who had already gotten out of his truck and was waiting for us.

"What?" I prodded when Cas failed to continue, catching Sam's eye as I turned into the garage, infinitesimally nodding to him that I was okay.

Cas was still silent as I parked the Impala, Sam remaining for a few more moments after I shut the car off before I saw him out of the corner of my eye making his way towards the door to the inside of the bunker.

Now having the silence and privacy, I looked over at Cas, who was staring at my dashboard with his hands clasped in his lap with a brooding, pensive look on his face that made his brows mash together like a fuzzy caterpillar.

"Cas?" I said softly, a bit concerned with his silence.

He finally jerked a little, looking over at me with the same brooding scowl, hardly looking me in the eyes as he opened the door.

"Nothing," he murmured, already out of the Impala and shutting the door behind him before I could retort.

I sighed, pulling the keys from the ignition and getting out of the car, fully prepared to chase after him and demand an answer, but Claire came bursting into the garage before I could so much as close
"Dean-! Cas.." She said softly, coming to a slow stop as she gazed up at Cas, her eyes narrowed in speculation, staring as if she expected Cas to turn into a monster.

"Claire, it's been a long time." Cas said with a warm smile as he gazed at her. "You've gotten older."

"Gee, thanks Cas." Claire rolled her eyes, stepping forward to give Cas a hug. "Sam's waiting inside with Jazz."

"We're coming." I said as Cas and Claire parted, Claire waving Cas on as she came to walk with me.

"What the hell happened?" Claire hissed to me as soon as Cas was out of earshot, heading up the stairs into the bunker. "Jazz told me what Sam explained over the phone, but.. how?"

"He remembers everything up until the last six months, and I have no damn clue." I said softly, the two of us slowly following Cas into the bunker.

"But... how?" She exclaimed as I closed the door to the garage.

"Don't you think I would've led with that?" I retorted a bit harsher than I intended, and I didn't miss the slight hint of pain reveal itself on her face as her lips thinned into a line. "Sorry."

"Let's just get this sorted out." She replied, though not unkindly, shooting me a small smile as she jogged ahead of me towards Cas, saying that they were in the study and not the kitchen like where Cas was heading.

He paused, letting Claire lead the way, gazing over at me as I walked up to him.

"The bunker has changed a lot since I've last seen it." Cas mused softly, studying a large picture hung on the wall of me, Sam and Jazz sitting in the study, Rayne a bit blurry as she jumped into the photo last minute, our faces frozen as we laughed in response.

"Yeah.. How long has it been?" I asked quietly, pausing as Cas looked over the other photos Rayne and Jazz had hung up alongside that one.

"One year, six months, nine days, seventeen hours and sixteen seconds." Cas answered softly, his gaze lingering on a photo of me and my mom, my face split into a wide grin as she held four year old me in her arms.

"It's been awhile." I murmured, the guilt and remorse that I had felt back when I first regained my sanity and memories all those months ago returning.

Cas seemed to sense something in my voice, turning his head to look at me, his lips downturned infinitesimally as he gazed at me, and I looked down as I felt his fingers brush over mine, the touch subtle, yet everything I didn't realize I needed in the moment. His gaze lingered for a moment, letting his fingers fall from mine, and I tried to ignore the chill that rushed through me as I remembered our parting - what was it? - one year, six months and too damn long ago yet again.

Saying nothing more, the two of us walked into the study as Rayne leaned against the wall, glancing back at us.

"Hi Cas, Dean." Jazz greeted us as we walked in, coming over to hug Cas.

"Hello Jazz," Cas smiled warmly as he saw her, giving her a brief hug before looking over at Rayne.
"I'm assuming you're Rayne?"

"Yep, I've heard a lot about you." Rayne said, shooting me a quizzical look as she came over to hug Cas. "Dean is sick in love with you." She added with a grin, Cas smiling shyly as I rolled my eyes.

"I wanted to thank you for looking after Dean during my um, my absence." Cas said softly, gazing down at Rayne, the room silent.

"Of course Cas, you don't need to thank me." She assured him, pulling out the empty chair next to Claire and sitting. "So, uh, Sam filled us in on what happened, and I guess I was wondering how this is even possible..?" Rayne continued as Cas sat in the chair across from her, pulling out the chair next to him for me.

"Since your memory has been, uh.." Jazz jumped in then paused, mentally searching for the word she was looking for as I sat next to Cas in the chair he had pulled out for me. "Joggled?" She finally said when she landed on a word.

"It appears so based on what Dean has relayed to me," Cas nodded, clasping his hands in his lap, and I tried to squash the part of me that wanted to reach out and grab his hand. "I don't understand why I do not recall anything from the last six months though."

"Nothing at all?" Jazz clarified, instantly in her mental doctor mode, caramel skin in focused lines.

Cas shook his head, glancing over at me when my chair creaked as I leaned back in it, and I bit back a smile as he reached across to hold my left hand, soft, warm fingers enveloping mine.

"I don't get it." Sam said after a brief silence. "Did Benjamin jumpstart his hard drive or something?"

"Doesn't really seem likely." I sighed, intertwining my fingers with Cas' under the table. "If it was the case, then wouldn't we have encountered something of the like sooner?"

"True." Sam admitted, frowning.

"And I concur that it's impossible," Cas chimed in. "A phantasm has no possible reach of such a power to restore memories. Alter and erase recollections for a time, yes, but not restore."

"Then what else could it be? I mean, he got ghost killed." I shrugged, a part of me wondering if I wasn't looking a gift horse in the mouth.

Maybe this is what I had at one point been wishing for...

"Nothing that would make sense with our circumstances." Cas replied, and the stumped faces around the table was the only response.

"Well... Is anyone hungry? I could make us all something while we do research.." Rayne tentatively suggested after a few awkward moments of silence.

"I'm up for that." Sam agreed as he stood up to peruse the bookshelf behind him and Jazz.

"I'll help you." Jazz volunteered as she pushed back her chair.

"I'll stay here," Claire said, having already gotten up and been searching for books as we were talking.

"Guess it's gonna be a late one..." I muttered, Cas' gaze on me as I got up from my chair to start looking for books on angels.
Sam, Cas, Claire and I each grabbed every angel book and file we could find off of the shelves and anywhere else in the bunker, tediously pouring over each page we turned. We ended up making a system, Cas and Sam taking the book reading, while I managed to take the responsibility of just reading the files with Claire, Sam shooting me a knowing, judgmental look that said *you just didn't want to read books did you* as we settled our roles.

Jazz and Rayne returned a bit later with a large plate of nachos for us all to share, joining us in our study group whilst small talk commenced, mostly (Claire) the girls questioning Cas to try and glean more - possibly useful - information out of him, though I think a part of their rigorous questioning was testing to see if it really was Cas. Although I didn't need to hear every answer Cas gave to know that it was him, it only solidified the fact and reassured me that my angel was home.

Despite the nine thick books and seventeen files combined we all scoured through, we still found nothing to cast further light on the situation, much to my worry and slight relief alike.

I also hadn't truly realized how much I'd missed Cas' soft, and subtle touches until now when he was here in the present treating me like he had before The Empty. I didn't realize that back even before we took the leap, that I craved his mere presence. My skin would burst alive in sensations each time the back of his hand brushed up against mine when he turned a page in his book, or when his fingers trailed along my forearm for a moment when he got up to get another book. Or the way my pulse would race when he would offer me the plate of nachos, wide eyes gazing into mine warmly, like twin sunny skies.

I didn't realize how much I missed the person I was when he was with me.

"I'm beat, why don't we pick this up tomorrow?" Jazz yawned hours later, all but sleeping in her seat. "We'll be better equipped with some sleep under our belts."

"You talk as if it's an accessory to the batbelt." I chuckled and she rolled her eyes with a light laugh.

"Goodnight everyone." Jazz said with a small smile as she coaxed a half asleep Sam to stand.

"Night guys." Rayne chimed in, commotion flooding over the table as everyone got up to get ready for bed, Claire waving as she left.

"Dean-"

I looked up as I stood to see Sam looking at me warily, not needing to speak for me to hear his warning as Cas walked past me. I merely nodded slightly to him.

*Trust me.*

Sam pursed his lips, not entirely comfortable with the idea, but he nodded in obvious acquiescence, taking Jazz's hand and walking with her towards their room with Rayne and Claire.

"Dean," Cas said softly as everyone disappeared into the hallway beyond the main room. "Would you prefer to be alone?"

I didn't need a translator to know what he really meant.

"No, I don't mind." I answered honestly and simply, and probably not with as much thought as I should've put into it.

He just nodded, reaching out and intertwining his fingers with mine once everyone was out of sight, gazing so adoringly at me I flushed.
"What?" I griped out of reflex, the two of us standing there, gazing at each other.

"It's still difficult to grasp that I'm here with you." He said softly, fingers slightly tightening around my hand.

"You've been here." I assured him gently, wanting him to understand that he had been out of whatever hellish crap he had been trapped with in The Empty for a long time now.

He said nothing, just continued gazing at me for a moment before he gently tugged my hand, leading me into the hallway and turning off the light behind us.

Everyone was already in their respective rooms by the time Cas and I got to my/our room. Nothing was said as we stepped inside and closed the door behind us, and while the silence wasn't uncomfortable, there was something in it aside from the obvious mystery from earlier that night that was nagging at me, though I couldn't put my finger on exactly what.

Cas sat in his chair off to the side, his expression falling into that deep, brooding mask he had worn earlier that night, but I decided to leave him to his own devices as I went to shower. The warm water eased my exhaustion worn body and physically relaxed me, which was nice, but it displeased me to come out of the bathroom to see Cas in the same exact position and mood I'd left him in; hell, he was the hotter version of The Thinker, only he'd changed into a pair of my old sweatpants and Nirvana t-shirt.

"Cas?" I called his name as I dried my hair a bit more with a towel, having not bothered to put a shirt on since the bunker was getting warmer with the weather, summer all but already here in Kansas. "What's goin' on man?"

Like a statue coming to life, he slowly lifted his head up from where it had been resting on his fingers, the harsh lines on his face from deep thought fading as he gazed at me, saying nothing.

"What..?" I said finally, breaking under his intense scrutiny, tossing my towel back into the backroom.

"This is the first time I've been able to look at you since we parted." He said simply, his eyes drinking me in not with lust, but with warmth, the way I'd seen Sam gazing at Jazz at times, as if they were both admiring the most beautiful things to ever grace the face of the earth.

"That's not true." I mumbled, pulling back my bedsheets as Cas stood.

"Dean, is something wrong? I don't mean our current predicament, I mean otherwise."

"No." I answered unthinkingly, exhaling as I laid on my bed and got comfortable.

"Dean." Cas said in a warning tone, the bed dipping under his weight as he laid besides me, my shirt riding up his stomach a bit, a sliver of his skin showing.

I sighed up at the ceiling, rubbing my eyes.

"There's nothing wrong aside from the obvious, Cas." I muttered through my fingers.

He didn't reply, and I internally thanked god that he'd dropped the subject. Turning, I was in the midst of reaching up to turn off the lamp when he spoke.

"You blame yourself, don't you."
"What?" I left the light on, rolling back over to face him, Cas lying on his side.

"Are you that naive enough to believe that I don't see it, Dean?" He sighed, as if it was a great tragedy.

"See what?" I waved my hand for emphasis, not seeing his point, and I was starting to get grumpy with my weariness. "I'm fine."

"That's not the impression I received from you today," he disagreed, reaching out and taking my hand in his. "I witnessed it every time I touched you."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I grouched, wishing he would shut up with this emotional crap so I could sleep.

"You behaved as if the second I ceased touching you, that I would disappear..." He said softly, agonizingly.

I was silent, thinking about how it felt when his hands were wrenched from mine.

That emptiness...

"Yeah, well, I'm fine." I muttered, twisting around to turn off my light, plunging us into darkness.

"Dean-" I heard Cas whine in the dark, and I rolled my eyes as I laid on my back.

"Cas, how many times do I gotta say it?" I grumbled, shaking my head as I stared up into the dim light, my eyes beginning to distinguish the shapes that made up the furniture in my room as my eyes adjusted.

Cas said nothing, much to my relief as I pulled the blankets higher up now that I was comfortable. I exhaled, content. I never realized how much I had missed the sounds of Cas' breaths in the dark, or the way his hand felt in mine. Soft and warm, and big enough to fit my hand almost as perfectly as a puzzle piece. Holding his hand felt new to me in a sense, having reacclimated myself to holding and touching women during my drunken holiday, which already seemed like ages ago. It wasn't that holding hands with a woman was no longer to my taste, there would never be a day where I would pass that up, but the idea of doing anything physical with a woman just didn't have the same luster it once held for me. Guess I could blame the hand that was holding mine now. The hand that had both hurt me and healed me alike, the hand that-

Then abruptly, I felt Cas' hand being suddenly wrenched from mine, and panic swept through me.

No. No, no, no, I swore I'd never loose him again!

I panicked, whirling around to try and find him again, only to find Cas' hands resting against the bed as he gazed at me calmly in the dim light, and I knew I was caught. He said nothing, and yet his penetrating gaze was almost worse than my dad's when I had broken one of his orders and he had found me out.

"Cas..." I pleaded, though I had no idea what I was even pleading for.

"What happened."

"What?"

"Before I sent you back here from The Empty, what happened?"
"Don't you remember?"

"That's not what I asked you." Cas said coolly, stubbornly, just daring me to do the foolhardy thing of resisting him.

I sighed, a part of me wanting to retort out of reflex, but I was too tired, and I found myself giving him the answer before I had consciously decided it.

"I had wounded my leg on those damn stairs, so we hid in that room and you tricked me into going back to get help."

"And?"

"And? And what?" I snapped irritably.

Cas took a breath, long and hard, as if he was realizing some hopeless thing, putting his two fingers out. "Dean, I want you to remember this, really remember it." Then he pressed two fingers to my forehead.

I blinked, finding myself feeling... odd... in some way that I couldn't exactly say how, but I just knew it in my gut, though it wasn't exactly a bad thing at the same time despite it's strangeness. As my vision adjusted, I realized that I was seeing everything from Cas' point of view.

Just like how he had done when he was brought back from Purgatory...

"Do you remember the feeling?"

I watched myself take a breath from where I was sitting propped up against the wall, the sleeve from Cas' trench coat wrapped around my left calf, blood seeping through the tanned fabric.

I watched myself nod, and I remember how I had been pleased with the small smile on Cas' face.

"Good, I want you to remember that," Cas said, and while I couldn't hear Cas' thoughts or anything, I could feel his emotions, and his rising fear and grief was scaring me, knowing the ending, but I watched on helplessly. "Think hard about it Dean," Cas continued, and I could feel how hard he was fighting to keep himself in check, though there was also an odd underlying calm. "And don't stop thinking about it, okay?"

I had nodded in response, and while what exactly I was thinking then was fuzzy to even me, I didn't need to remember how I felt, because the fear and panicked cognizance in my face was clear as day.

"Come with me," I heard myself plead, my request punctuated by the wide, terrified glimmer in my eyes when Cas had stepped back. "Don't leave me-"

"I'm here," Cas soothed me, stepping back forward as I felt his chest ache with the same pain I felt when he was gone. Cas knelt to hold my hands tightly in his, and I felt him take a small breath, steeling himself, and I felt him forcing his sorrow away. I felt an acquiesced peace of sorts fall over him as he began reciting the spell to get me back home. I noticed how despite the pain, Cas was fighting desperately to hide it from very impressionable, terrified me; his gaze on me was unrelenting, despite the obvious pain on my face that only wounded him. The air grew cold around us, the creatures' cries outside became loud and insistent, but even they were being drowned out with the howl of wind that began to circulate through the room along with Cas' words.
It amazed me how calm and collected Cas was in the situation despite the blinding agony he had felt earlier, though my perception began to change the longer Cas went on reciting the spell.

I noticed a blue glow filling the room, emanating from the strange circular sigil that Cas had painted on the wall behind me in his own blood, and I watched myself look over my shoulder to see. The hastily drawn sigil grew a brighter and brighter blue with each word Cas uttered, and memory me was forced to face back forward when it got too bright, staring right at me- er, Cas.

I heard Cas falter, a stutter in his chest as he met my wide eyes, and if I had any remaining doubts on how Cas felt about me, they were vaporized in an instant. The intense shattering that I could feel in his chest that although wasn’t as sharp and physically choking as it would be for me, was almost worse in a way. The pain he felt looking into my eyes and thinking it was the last time, was like being slowly stabbed with a dull blade. Instead of the pain hitting him all at once, it sort of sunk in instead. It was like he was slowly being saturated in his grief, all the pain sinking into him, like hot water warming cold bones. It became like a film over him, one single solitary sensation. Then it suddenly hit me why Cas struggled so much with emotions, and gave me a deeper appreciation for his progress in emotional blocks.

I realized that Cas couldn't feel emotions as fluidly as I did, which wasn't to say that he couldn't feel anything, it was obvious he could feel everything I could, but at a much slower rate and less intense. Each emotion he could only truly feel was just that emotion alone. It seemed like he couldn't feel a whirlwind of emotions at once like how I could; his mind was so calculative, his wiring so precise and delicate, that with that kind of focus, it was too fine tuned to pick up every note in the song. It was like he could only hear the piano in the song, instead of the singer, guitarist, and whatever else. With any emotion, he only felt one or two at most at once, and was so completely honed in on the emotion, that he didn't get the same terror and overwhelming sense of wildness that I felt when I was in a scary situation.

I remembered in this moment, that I myself had felt terrified, confused, and miserable, not to mention hurt from my leg and hurt to be loosing Cas. Feeling all that at once was chaotic, and that's probably what enhanced the sting in each emotion, but Cas in the same moment and situation, could only focus on one thing.

The loss.

I could sense how a part of him was mentally dealing with the other feelings that I had felt vividly, but the only thing he felt, was the hollow loss beating in this chest knowing he was loosing me.

And.. a hint of something else...-

"Come with me." I heard myself plead over the howl of the wind, Cas stopping his incantation, the loss beating in his chest like a drum, but Cas wasn’t fighting it. In fact he was calm.. at peace..

"I love you," I heard Cas tell memory me, a burst of shallow pain beating through his chest as he surged forward to kiss me, his fingers gripping my memorized face so tightly as the pain he felt got the best of him for a split second, but he recovered by the time he pulled away from me.

That strange peace washed over him again as he stepped back, stopping when memory me gripped his hands, then suddenly, it hit me.

He expected to die...

I watched on, horrified and grieved as Cas paused, gazing at me, a sense of longing flushing through him as he gazed at me. Memory me looked terrified, clutching Cas' hands like they were a
"Please," memory me pleaded. "Don't leave me."

I felt Cas swallow, clutching my hands tighter.

"Dean, I want you to be happy. I want you to love others the way you love me, and even Sam. Maybe you'll recollect this, and maybe you won't, but."

"Don't tell me this! I need you!" I heard myself exclaim, and I couldn't breathe.

"Dean- you don't-" Cas stammered, but I had apparently ignored him.

"That's all I know!" I barreled on, my voice high with hysteria and I could feel Cas switching between ecstatic, and being weak with heartbreak. "That's all I know.."

Cas took a breath, jumping slightly as one of those damned creatures threw itself at the door, the wall shuddering as Cas took me in his arms, and memory me gratefully surrendered to his embrace.

"We've been through much together, you and I," Cas said softly enough for only me to hear, his body vibrating with his pain as he released me. "Thank you for everything."

He could feel me readying myself for a reply, so with a quick breath, Cas said the final word, taking my hand when I grabbed it, but when he realized I was still struggling to stay with him, he let me go, the loss in his chest at his strongest, and it felt as if mountains and cities where crumbling within him as he watched me fade, fade, fade, gone.

Then I abruptly found myself launched back into the present and into my body again, Cas retracting his fingers from my forehead.

"Little warning next time?" I said sourly, though a part of me was strangely eased in a way I couldn't say yet, I was still reeling with how Cas felt, and it was too much.

"I thought my insistence that you remember what I was going to show you was a sufficient forewarning." Cas retorted coolly, and my Cas Phd made his infinitesimal smile plain as day.

"Not really, because, y'know, there's a thing called elaboration." I tapped the side of my head. "Do I need to get the dictionary?"

Cas narrowed his eyes at me and I couldn't help but grin, Cas scowling for a bit more before he broke into a smile.

"Dammit Dean.." He muttered, smiling warmly at me, his hand sliding across the mattress to trail up the side of my neck to cup my face. "I missed you."

"I know," I said softly, closing my eyes and leaning into his touch.

Cas said nothing, gently rubbing my check with his thumb.

He did this for several minutes, his hand so warm and gentle on my face, his finger soothing. I couldn't remember the last time I had really been this truly content. It wasn't that amnesia Cas wasn't exciting for me or anything, our sparks just hadn't really built up yet. It was all new, versus with this Cas. My Cas, him and I. Well, let's say we had years of denied desire and tension simmering every second we were apart or together.

And that, is everything I craved all in one.
I squinted open an eye as Cas shifted, watching Cas through slits as he got himself more comfortable, his hand slipping from my face.

I started feeling cold, suddenly wondering if everything was a wildly cruel dream, when Cas wrapped his arms possessively around me, pulling me to his chest.

I happily nuzzled my face into his neck as he pulled the blankets up around me.

I breathed in deep.

_Honey and cinnamon._

_The only proof that amnesia Cas was real…_

Once Cas had finished wrapping us up, he nuzzled back against me, his arms wrapped tight around me.

"What are you thinking about?" His whisper was like whisky in the dark - rough and intoxicating.

I took in a deep, lazy breath of contentment, and I smiled as I heard Cas huff in amusement at that.

"I feel like 'm dreaming." I murmured, subconsciously pulling him closer. "Feel like you'll disappear." 

"I won't." Cas promised, and I felt my body light up like fireworks when he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. "I'm here to stay."

I smiled, ignoring the pricking in my eyes as I let him cradle me to him, the pure, unadulterated joy I felt dizzying, and I was pretty sure it was better than recreationally getting high, as amnesia Cas had suggested only yesterday night.

I was willing to bet this feeling was better.

Maybe...

Hell, who knew, and frankly, I didn't give a damn in the moment, only concerned with holding Cas to me.

I was only concerned with listening to his heartbeat as he rolled on his back and let me lay my head on his chest.

I was only concerned listening to how he breathed, how his breaths would pick up each time I moved, like it was the most amazing thing he was witnessing.

I was reminded of the beautifully simple way he saw things, and now after his latest angelic feat, it made sense.

It occurred to me how I wouldn't see Cas the same for a bit after this, or maybe forever - but I got so damn pissed at him at times I doubt it would last - but not in a bad way. I understood him more now, and I always enjoyed learning more about Cas' angelic self. I mean, I was still curious to this day what Jimmy Novak and Claire could see that I couldn't because I wasn't suited for it or whatever crap. At this point, all I knew was Cas' angelic form was as tall as the Chrysler State Building, and despite that big detail, it wasn't much to go on.

I felt Cas shift, moving on the bed before stopping, and even though I was laying on my side facing away from him now, I felt like he was staring at me.
"Go to sleep Dean."

"How do you even know I'm awake?!" I demanded as I rolled over onto my back, wrapping my arm around Cas as he laid his head on my chest.

"I can tell by the way you breathe." He said simply, getting comfortable, cuddled and wrapped around me like a koala.

"Y'know how creepy that sounds?" I scoffed with a laugh despite myself.

"Our relationship is not exactly orthodox." Cas pointed out, and I pursed my lips.

"Yeah.. You're right. Besides," I smirked, leaning down a little to speak quietly in his ear. "Isn't this for you like, I dunno, illegal in heaven?"

"Undoubtedly so." Cas said softly, finding no humor in my wording. "Despite the fact that you and I cannot reproduce in these bodies, I believe they would find it just as sinful-

"Okay, I've heard enough." I broke in as soon as Cas mentioned 'reproduce'.

I could almost see Cas frowning after he said: "Does the concept of us reproducing scare you?"

"What? No." I scoffed, although I was hella sure that Cas could see right through me.

"So... If I chose another body... A-a woman, would.. would you, uh, want that, Dean?" Despite his trouble getting the words out, it was so clear to me that he was serious. If abandoning his body for a woman's so that way him- er, her, and I could have children should that be my desire, he would. "Because I know how you-"

"Cas, stop right there." I broke in before he could say more, kissing the dip between his jaw and his neck. "I don't want anything to change, alright buddy?"

"But Dean..." Cas persisted, and I rubbed his back lightly.

"Cas," I said with slight warning, and he quieted.

I heard him take a deep breath, as if sighing, and I felt him relax, dropping the subject, much to my relief.

"The idea of a child in the image of you makes me feel-" Cas trailed off - not dropping the subject as I had thought he had - mentally searching for the word he was wanting, and I honestly was too curious to hear him finish his sentence to stop him. "Frankly, the feeling is indescribable, but it makes me happy."

"It'd be in your image too." I mumbled, and despite the hog wild terror to even be discussing this topic, I remembered back when I first thought for an instant that Ben was mine.

The fear. The excitement. The anxiety. The exhilaration... Those feelings even after learning he wasn't mine didn't fade though, because in an inexplicable way, he was mine.

It's not that I never wanted rug-rats of my own, I had at one point, but with everything that had happened over the span of the last decade, I had made my peace with believing that I never would. Hell, how could I expect to care and nurture a child when half of the damn world wanted me dead along with my friggin luck? Not to mention half the time I could hardly take care of what I had already, and if that wasn't enough, I could barely even keep my lover around for longer than a week
Anyway, I knew I was the last person who should have kids. I was a killer, a murderer with more blood on my hands than most serial killers, and that was saying something. I was too damaged, too much like my father... I would never forgive myself if I ended up putting my child through the same hell that I had gone through. Hell, I still felt bad for how I had boxed Ben and Lisa up months before she broke up with me, and that was years ago now. Though, if I wanted to be truly honest with myself, in a deep and buried, forgotten part of me, the idea of a child of my own did entice me, and secretly wondered what a child of Cas would look like if he took a female vessel, how it would behave...

Would it have blue eyes the same color as Cas’?

Cas hummed in response now, nuzzling against my neck, saying nothing more to my slight surprise.

"Cas.. is that what you want?" I ventured nervously, staring up at the ceiling.

I heard him take a breath, contemplating the idea.

"Unfortunately, I don't believe having a child would be feasible with our way of existence." He said simply, exhaling softly.

I nodded, though I agreed with his statement, he hadn't answered my question.

"You didn't answer my question." I murmured, and I felt Cas shift in my arms.

He hesitated, and I almost regretted pushing it.

"If circumstances were different." He finally said softly, lifting his head off of my chest, and I felt him press a soft kiss to my jaw.

I sighed, a part of me mourning this fact, knowing that it was an idea that would never become real, but in all reality, was for the better.

Cas seemed to sense my woe, and maybe was akin to it as he kissed my cheek, pulling himself closer to me.

"I know humans seem to believe that having children or being vastly successful in business endeavors is the only way to leave a legacy," Cas said softly in-between placing soft kisses to my skin as I listened. "But I think humans fail to realize that leaving a legacy isn't limited to leaving physical fragments behind." Another kiss on my cheek. "You as well as Sam have left lasting impressions within me that transformed me, and that will resonate with me until the day I cease to exist." He cupped my face with his hand, and I could feel his gaze on me though I could hardly see, willing me to hear him. "I have witnessed you both selflessly risking your lives for others, and I think it's a tragedy that neither of you seem to grasp the gravity of that. It grieves me that you both as well as the rest of your kind delude yourselves into thinking that undocumented actions lacking physical manifestations count in regards to legacy. You and your kind do not credit your unspoken actions and undocumented words enough. Every moment has a chance to leave a legacy in someone, and Dean, just because you'll not be leaving a legacy in the conventional sense, do not deceive yourself into believing that you have not, because nothing is farther from the truth."

I was both surprised and touched at his monologue, huffing a laugh.

I felt Cas shift, as if he was trying to get a better look at me.
"Dean, I don't see how this is humorous."

"It's not," I said, and I smiled a little to myself as I could almost see the inquisitive furrow in his brow. "I just uh, I don't know what to say." I admitted.

I was barely able to make out that Cas smiled at me in the dark, and I smiled too.

"You don't have to say anything, Dean." Cas assured me, his voice warm and sweet like honey, his hand cradling my face, rubbing my cheek gently with his thumb.

I continued gazing at him, just so damn happy to be lying in bed with Cas again. It sounded so stupid and insignificant, and yet it was one of the most meaningful moments I've had all year.

Cas gazed at me a bit longer before he leaned in, pressing a chaste kiss on my lips.

I felt every damn nerve inside me came alive like a neon sign in an instant. My heart instantly elated and began racing so hard, I felt as if I had just drunk ten damn cans of energy drinks.

"Cas.." I whispered unconsciously, returning Cas' kiss. I rememorized the taste and feel of his lips, the feel of his arms wrapped around me, everything.

I'm sure if my life was being written into another damn Supernatural book, the reader would probably be thinking: "Damnit Dean, have you lost your friggin mind?"

I mean, only hours prior, Cas was an entirely different person that didn't attack me and accuse me of killing someone I had never heard of, and now I was lip-locking the guy? But fucking hell, I'm sure if you tried avoiding the love of your life for a year and practically a half on purpose, you'd break within days. God knew I had... And God knew I wasn't going to waste any of these precious hours with him, not like I had before.

While the gentle pace of our kiss didn't waver, Cas began to feverishly clutch at me as if his life depended upon it, his breaths beginning to grow choppy.

"Dean.. I-I missed you so much.." His voiced cracked, and my chest ached in response, carding my fingers through his hair.

"I know," I said softly, speaking against his lips as I gently ran my hand through his hair. "I know.."

He made this noise that sounded like heartbreak personified, and I only clutched him tighter, my throat burning.

"It's over Cas," I assured him, running my fingers down to the back of his neck, clutching the fine hairs there as I rested my forehead against Cas', eyes closed. "You're with me now. You're not in that damned place anymore."

He took a heavy, wet breath, as if he was crying within, and I was grieved to hear his pain.

I switched tactics, going to wrap my arms around him to soothe him, but Cas wasn't having it, instead pushing me back slightly to look into my eyes, and even in the dim light, I could plainly see the fear and desperation on his face.

"N-no, Dean, I want you." He said in frantic desperation, and I could feel his wild gaze on me, waiting for my consent despite his strong desire.

*Let me feel you.*
Now that I'm real...

"Yes." I said before I could stop myself, and I didn't regret it.

The second the word was out, he nodded, and it seemed he was trembling as he reached up to touch my face, as if he expected me to shatter or disappear. I reached up to lay my hand over the back of his, rubbing my thumb across his skin, determined to show him that I was real.

And maybe to assure myself as well...

Cas gazed at me, and I gazed back at the dark form of his face in the dim light, memorizing his outline. The contours of his face made up the most beautiful constellation, his eyes twin glimmering orbs in the low light.

For the first time in a long time, we breathed together, we lay together, and we were of one, sole being. And while it was true that I hadn't exactly been celibate since our separation, I had been put under forced abstinence from Cas for damn near two years as well as separation, there was one thing that hadn't changed at all during all that time.

I couldn't name it, as there was no word to describe it, but it was if I had found a lost cherished object long after it had been forgotten about. Despite its long absence and learning how to be without it, a part of you was never so ecstatic to find it.

I suddenly realized why it had been so plain to people like Bobby's zombie wife, Karen, that I had never been in love.

Hell, maybe I was still way outta my ballgame, but I could tell some impassible difference with Cas, then I had with anyone else - even Lisa.

I didn't realize how before, I was so blinded with sex, so blinded with lust, that I hadn't realized sex ain't love, and love ain't sex. I had thought the two were one, and not exclusive. But lying here with Cas, the world quiet around us as he pressed his lips softly to mine, this, was it.

I wasn't with Cas solely because he made me feel good both mentally and physically, I was with him because I wanted to be with him.

"I need you..."

My go-to phrase when I was on the cusps of loosing Cas.

But need and want were two different things, two different beasts.

And I never realized that until now, not until our lips were meeting in soft harmony, hands worshiping skin.

Need was such a feeble, dammed word. You could need and need and need, but what happened when you satisfied that need? When you sated it? You didn't need it much more after, did you?

No, I didn't need Cas, I wanted him.

I desired him, I longed to have him as my own.

I wanted to love Cas as he should be, to hold him so tightly in my arms that he would forget we were ever apart. I wanted to do him right, to stay with him until some son of a bitch pulled my last card. I even wanted to do the once unthinkable with him.
"Dean?" Cas brought me back to the present, gently kissing along my jaw. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I sighed, smiling in the dark as I cupped the back of his head, closing my eyes as I felt his feather light kisses. "I'm okay."

He made a soft sound close to a chuckle, kissing down to my neck, and as his hand glided down my side, I was so glad I had neglected to wear a shirt to bed.

"M glad you're here." I admitted, leaning closer to him.

"As am I." Cas agreed, kissing me softly.

I was easily lost in the kiss as it deepened, remembering how Cas kissed the way he spoke; Calculated, precise, and gentle.

Every touch and kiss that I had felt on my drunken holiday faded into forgotten corners of my mind, numb memories of Cas' touch rushing to the surface like an erupting volcano, leaving my skin hot. His every breath, his every touch was like traveling over an old road you used to use often, but hadn't in a while, but yet you still remembered every curve and pothole on it. It was like listening to an old favorite song, because it all came back as if a day hadn't passed since he had last touched me, since we had last disrobed one another. Every kiss he placed on my newly bare skin, every part of me he touched was so natural, so fluid.

Finally, he had returned to me.

The Castiel who gripped me tight and raised me from perdition.

"I love you." Cas whispered, nuzzling his nose against mine, pressing himself closer to me now that we were both bare, and I could hear a hint of old pain in his voice, as if he was mourning the time we'd lost together.

"I love you too."

The words fell from my mouth before I could stop them, and even if I could've stopped them, I wouldn't have, because the reaction it elicited from Cas would be something I would never forget.

The sound that tore from his throat made me want to laugh and cry, his obvious surprise and joy tearing out of him like a firework exploding.

"Dean-" he broke off, his voice so wet and watery, as if he was on the verge of tears, and to my utter surprise, he was beaming.

"Cas?" I said in concern, our current activity at a standstill as I propped myself up on an elbow to look at him. "Are you okay buddy?"

He huffed a small laugh, leaning back a bit to give me room, gazing at me with such warmth, I could've sworn his eyes were glowing. "Dean, I recall when I heard each and every single word when it was first uttered, but never have words ever held such significance for me as those."

I blinked, a warmth flooding through me.

I had finally done it. I finally said the four scariest words. And meant them.

Cas looked as if he was on cloud nine, a huge, gummy smile spread across his face as he gazed down at me, and it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. While yes, I'd seen my fair share of
pretty things and people, but this... Something about Cas' elated face, his fingers tracing over my face as his hips slowly began undulating against mine, something about it that I couldn't put my finger on, was perfect. Maybe this, this moment in time, this event, was the reason that the word, 'perfect', existed, despite its general failure as a practicality.

Maybe someone ages ago like me was with their lover, and seeing them for the first time.

Maybe the word was born in their mind when they saw their lover sitting in a chair, illuminated by the morning rays of the sunrise, skin glowing, hair shining paired with a content, sleepy smile.

Maybe it was when they were patching them back up from their latest adventure gone wrong, wiping away tears and seeing the goodness in their souls despite their failures.

Or maybe it was in a moment like this; bare of all obstructions and space, skin against skin, interlaced in the closest, most cosmic and sacred way in existence.

This, Cas, us, even, was perfect in the most indelibly inexplicable way.

I was so euphoric in the moment, I found myself thinking: "I never want this to end," despite a nagging part of me knowing that it would as Cas and I were lost in the heat of each other's mouths as our hips rocked against each other. Cas and I hadn't even really gotten to the good stuff, just going to town like we had our first time, albeit with more finesse. Despite that, I was perfectly content, just so damn happy to even be in this moment with Cas long after I had begun to think that they were over. I was so happy, that the part of me that was so damn happy, was even willing to die if it meant having this moment for eternity was possible.

If I had to choose one moment to replay forever for the rest of the time, I would choose this one. I would choose to relive every kiss, every adoring touch, every whisper of love Cas bestowed upon me. Every moment Cas spent irritated as he tried to find the lube when I wouldn't tell him to vex him, much to my amusement. I would choose the moment he commanded me to lie on my back, barking at me to be quiet when I made a smartass remark, and I would sure as hell choose the moment he straddled my hips and made me lie there as he balanced himself on his knees above my hips like an x-rated pin up and worked himself open once he found the lube in my bedside drawer.

Hell, I might not have ever been this happy in my life ever, all but a puddle beneath Cas, locked in the spell he had created between us, the heat escalating as he slowly sank down on me seemingly an eternity later. He was hypnotic, completely taking over me as he set the pace, keeping a slow and steady rhythm as he leaned down to kiss me, so deep and unrelenting, I was breathless all too soon.

It almost made me laugh how a mere three, almost four years ago, I would've balked at the idea of doing anything sexual with Cas, but now here I was making out with him as he rode me like he was made to do it. Throughout it all though, Cas controlled everything, and while I was struggling to keep up with him at times, the heat building up under my skin, Cas' moist breaths on my chest as he claimed me, was so worth it. Although normally I wasn't exactly a huge fan of bdsm, domination or anything of the like from far too many risky and bloody encounters over the years, not to mention torture, Cas dominated me in such a way that I never once felt that skin crawling panic of being trapped.

He gave me exactly what I wanted, kissed and drove me so far into euphoric oblivion that I was a puddle beneath him, lost in the ever cresting hell of pleasure that I couldn't quite tip over. And yet, knowing that I was completely at his mercy and trapped in the pleasure, I didn't feel restrained, didn't feel that nervous terror I always felt when bound. His soft and gentle fingers gliding up my side, my neck, my arms here and there, brought me back when I felt myself slipping away into the abyss. The soft kisses that he would press to my neck occasionally, kept me grounded, safe. Somehow, Cas had
discovered how to shatter me in the most exquisite way, and I wanted more. I was addicted to the way he was picking me apart with practiced precision, each grind of his hips, each lick of his tongue against my skin the best kind of sinful damnation.

Hell, if love making was a sin, I would walk right back down to hell happily, because I had no idea who in their right minds could think, could preach that a thing as glorious as this, was a sin.

Yeah, okay, so maybe some forms of sex was pretty damn sinful, but I just knew in this moment, nothing could be purer.

Nothing could be more holy than finally holding Cas to me after all this time, to feel the heat and the enchanting fidelity between us, to be in love and creating it between us in the most beautifully and fantastic way that words could never do true justice to.

I mean, words were merely a conspiracy between two people, because nothing could compare to sensations, emotions.

Experiences...

Cas' mouthy exploration over my body eventually ebbed into his panting, whimpering breaths against my lips as his pace stuttered, signaling a near close to an eternity I wasn't yet ready to say goodbye to, but I had to.

With a languished moan, I felt Cas clench around me as he released his spend on my stomach, fingers digging into his handprint on my arm while his opposite hand covered my eyes, and I was faintly able to detect the same, blue-white light he had emitted what felt like so long ago when him and I first had sex when he had his Grace.

A part of me wanted to hold on, but then Cas said my name with such adoring reverence, I found the pleasure surging over me before I could stop it. The bittersweet onslaught of both euphoria and the gravity of the moment ending hit me like a tidal-wave, leaving me weak on the bed like a ton of bricks.

I gasped for air, drunk with the endorphins swimming through me, Cas still draped over me, clutching me like he would die if he ever let go.

Once we came down, I was again reminded what a gentle and loving partner Cas was in bed, the two of us talking softly to each other afterwards and exchanging a few kisses, which eventually led to round two, which I fully enjoyed. All the emptiness in my chest from his absence and Amnesia Cas' wary coolness, was soon overflowing with warmth and contentment. I don't even remember when I fell asleep, just endless warmth and Cas' embrace surrounding me.

For the first time in a long time, I slept peacefully, and although I could hardly remember what I had dreamt about, I knew they were good dreams.

I was surprised to wake up to an empty bed the next morning, and I began to panic, terrified that last night was actually a wickedly cruel dream. I sat up, fully prepared to search the bunker for Cas, but then I smelled bacon, and I exhaled, realizing Cas was probably in the kitchen with everyone else. While it kind of hurt that he hadn't bothered to stay in bed with me, I got over it, going to my bathroom to shower.

I nearly had a heart attack to see a glimpse of something red on my way to the toilet past the mirror, and I hastily stepped back into it's view. Of course, there was a spattering of love bites all over my upper chest and two on my neck, but that wasn't what caught my eye.
Cas' handprint on my arm, which had mostly faded over time, was now the same bright red color it was when I first discovered it, and ached slightly at my touch just as it had when I first gotten it. I couldn't understand it, and I made a mental note to ask Cas about it as I resumed my morning routine.

A shower and a change of clothes twenty minutes later, I headed out of my room to the kitchen, surprised to only find Cas there, his back to me as he was cooking at the stove.

"Mornin' sunshine." I murmured, walking up behind him and wrapping my arms around his waist, kissing the back of his neck.

"I never knew you could be so soft, why didn't you give me any pet names?" Cas laughed, though it didn't sound like him at all.

I was suddenly flung backwards onto my back with such bruising force, I heard more than felt a bone somewhere crack as a result.

"W-what-" I huffed, struggled to breathe as the wind was knocked out of me - though I wasn't having much luck - while Cas was laughing that strange laugh. "Cas-"

"Mmm, try again." Cas purred with a laugh, putting a bowl on the counter, lightheartedly tossing something in the bowl.

It suddenly hit me with terrifying realization that Cas was possessed, then an even worse thought hit me.

*Maybe it never was Cas in the first place...*

"You son of a bitch, what did you do with Cas!?" I exclaimed, trying to get up, groaning as I was held down.

"I think you mean, daughter of a witch." Cas- er the entity within him, laughed, continuing to gather herbs and small bones that were hidden in our cupboards, adding them to the bowl.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, then a horrifying idea came to me.

"Nira..?" I ventured, praying to God that I was wrong.

"Nice to see you again Deano." She giggled, though it sounded strange coming from Cas' body.

"It was you all along, wasn't it. Cas is dead." I said weakly, rolling to my side with a wince as the broken bone throbbed.

*Definitely a rib...*

"No, no, no, he's quite alive, just locked in his dreamworld." She said, peering in the bowl before nodding to herself. "He thinks you two are eating breakfast together right now."

"You bitch." I swore, struggling against the invisible force holding me down.

She laughed, and it hurt to see her wickedness spilling onto Cas' face.

"So, why play dress up?" I hissed, trying to calculate how to get free.

*Where was everyone else?*

"Well, I didn't plan to at first," she admitted, pouring blood into the bowl and my skin was cold,
hoping to god it wasn't Sam's blood, or any of the girls... "But I knew from experience, that while absence does make the heart grow fonder, you also learn to live with it if the person is gone long enough, and I couldn't let you have that, not after what you had taken from me." She smirked. "So, I devised a spell that would make me become one with Cas when I brought him back from The Empty."

"I should've known.." I muttered, swallowing thickly as she chuckled. "It was too easy."

"And yet, you fell for your pathetic boyfriend again, even without the benefit of his memories."

"So what, did your memory erase button stop working?" I retorted.

"No, that damned ghost drained me." She sighed, shaking her head. "I made the spell specifically so I could harness Cas' grace to hide myself as to keep him from sensing me, as well as to block his memories from him. I thought it'd be fun to give you back a used toy." She grinned at me. "At first, I thought the whole ghost K.O. was a bad thing, but it was the greatest thing that could happen. I mean, what's better than stringing you along for months with a version of Cas who could see the real you and despised you for it, only when you were just getting comfortable, to give you back your Cas?"

Although I had gotten my breath back, I could hardly breathe, my whole world seemingly crashing down around me as she was still grinning, her grin matching Lucifer's when he had possessed Cas.

"And boy, Cas sure did put the cherry on top after last night." She clicked her tongue, smirking. "To have it all for a night only to loose it in the morning, what luck you have Winchester." She grabbed a single, tiny bone piece, holding it over the bowl as she gazed up at me through Cas' thick lashes, the blue eyes I once knew no longer what I remembered. "I've had my fun though, farewell Winchester."

She smirked, tossing the tiny bone in the bowl, a brilliant purple light growing in intensity until it nearly blinded me, forcing me to shut my eyes.

The air around me felt like boiling water, and yet... nothing was happening to me. Sure, I felt a hint of the spell's wrath over my bare skin, and I think even my clothes were scorching from the effects, but other than that, I was fine. That is, until I felt a new sensation, a warmth.

Suddenly, the pain I felt stopped, and I felt something familiar, some sense I'd felt before.

*That warmth when Cas healed me...*

The purple light that seared through even my eyelids gradually faded, and I tentatively opened one eye, glancing around the room that was in perfect condition as if nothing had happened, the wicked, bloodthirsty grin on Cas' face receding.

A silence fell over us, the rage filling Cas - or Nira - slowly taking over Cas' once gentle face.

"Seems you're getting rusty there kiddo." I rasped, keening as the pain in my broken rib flared.

"You insolent-" Nira charged me, clearly ready to tear me apart with her bare hands, but then she suddenly stopped inches from my face, a wicked smirk rising on the body of my lover's face, one that made my stomach churn. "Just when I think all is lost, it only gets better." She purred, trailing a finger along my jawline, and I turned away. "I have much better plans for you Deano, much better."

She laughed, rising and waving her hand at the messy counter, uttering a few words of latin and within a blink of an eye, the kitchen was clean and organized once again.
"Come on, lover," she cackled, beckoning me with a finger as she walked towards the doorway. "You and I have some things to discuss."
Fourteen

I followed Nira out of the kitchen and started trailing behind her towards the garage, hardly able to wrap my mind around what had just happened. I was panicking over Cas, panicking over the fact that my brother and the girls could possibly be dead.

All because of me...

I followed Nira/Cas into the garage, and I nearly collapsed in relief to see Sam walking up, fresh from a morning run.

"Hey guys, where you going?" He asks as he took his earbuds out, smiling at us.

"We're just going out for a walk." Nira/Cas said, and I didn't miss the warning glance Nira shot me.

"Are you now?" Sam drawled, smirking after he glanced at my neck, and I flushed, having forgotten about the wrecked state of my neck.

"Yeah, we'll be back later." I feigned indifference, too scared to put Cas or Sam in danger.

"Don't take too long." Sam laughed, putting his earbuds away as he walked past us towards the door leading into the bunker.

"So dear baby brother knows about your sinful activities now, does he?" Nira laughed in such a way that she made it seem like it was a foul thing, something to be ashamed of.

"Go to hell." I snapped, walking with her outside.

"Don't get too smart with me, I just might take it out on your precious, dear little angel." She threatened, though her voice was sweet and seductive as the door behind us slammed shut. "Take me to a private place where we can talk, and don't try to trick me, I know all your angel's dirty little secrets."

I took a breath, clenching my fists as I started walking down Sam's running trail, heading for the dock. I was nearly blind with rage, wanting to rip Nira's soul or whatever the fuck she was from Cas' body with my own bare hands. I wanted to tear and burn her apart beyond recognition for using Cas as she had been.

Already my mind was calculating possible solutions, wondering if she could be cast out if I was able to clue Cas in, or if she had to be exorcised in some way. But hadn't Nira said she crafted the spell herself to be bound to Cas..? Surely getting rid of her the normal ways would be out then, she would've seen to that. But every spell had a cure, and I was going to do my damnedest to find it and end the bitch.

A few minutes later, we made it to the dock, and I couldn't help but become even more enraged as I remembered how a few years ago now, Nira had stolen Cas' Grace and nearly killed him, ending up with him falling to my feet at this very dock.

"Alright, so here's the deal Winchester-" I huffed as I was forced to my knees in one single motion, my knees cracking with the forceful impact and I hissed as a result. "You," Nira chuckled, kneeling
down to drag a finger along my bottom lip, and I was revolted and livid to watch the body of the person I loved look like the face of true evil.

*It was like he was possessed by Lucifer all over again...*

"You," Nira repeated, blue eyes roving over me. "Are going to be my little errand boy."

She laughed, and it ached to hear it as Cas’ laughter. If I had my eyes closed and didn't recognize the hint of malice there, I would've thought him and I were having a good old conversation about something so innocent.

"Who says I'll do anything you say, bitch?" I spat, grunting as she surged forward, painfully grabbing my chin with my boyfriend's delicate fingers, squeezing it with no remorse.

"Need I repeat that the only reason your pathetic angel is still even alive is because I am *allowing* it," she hissed, lip curled like a aggravated dog. "And you will do *exactly* as I tell you, or I will end your precious halo with a snap of my fingers, and slaughter your adorable little family back in the bunker and make you watch."

She threatened, leaning closer to me, my chin still throbbing under her brutal hold on me, and I was actually scared at the pure, unadulterated rage in blue eyes I knew so well but seemed so different. "I will make you watch a replay of what I did to your precious Ben and Lisa," she promised darkly, no coy, teasing threats from her now. "No, I will *make* you do it yourself... I'll make you tear the skin from their flesh while they're still breathing, and you'll get to hear every little scream."

"You really have no idea how much Cas can do." She smirked mirthlessly, shaking.
her head. "Power is wasted on the weak."

I ignored her, the physical pain in my chest receding, though the pain in my heart didn't.

"He can read your mind, and he can hear your every conversation within a thousand feet, but he doesn't." Nira said, though it sounded like she was musing aloud, a finger on her chin as she suddenly looked up at me as if she abruptly remembered my presence. "Guess it's time to test out some things.." She smirked, reaching out to me, and when I tried to move, I was frozen in place, helpless to her pressing Cas' fingers to my forehead.

Everything went black for a moment, then I returned to the present, blinking up at her.

"What the hell just happened?" I snapped, trying to move, only to find myself locked in place.

"Oh, I'm sure you'd love to remember." Nira cooed, smiling wickedly at me. "Get up. Your first task starts now."

I glared at her, my mind a muddled mess. I was staring at Cas, but I also wasn't. I was looking into the eyes attached to the body I knew so well, but seemed completely different.

Cas where are you in there...

"Like hell." I retorted, rising to my full height, staring Nira/Cas down, my hands in fists, frustrated.

"I think you want to rephrase that," she purred, pulling out Cas' angel blade agonizingly slow, placing the tip right over Cas' heart. "Y'see, this won't hurt me a bit, but Cas?" She laughed, pushing the blade hard enough against the skin that blood began to seep through Cas' shirt. "It'll just be little old me left in here."

"Okay," I said in a rush, my stomach twisting in anxiety at the sight, wanting to grab the blade and toss it far away from her grasp, but I had a feeling I would only bring the opposite affect. "What do you want? Me to paint your nails?"

She scoffed at me, the bitterness filling Cas' face gut wrenching.

"No, you're going to get me something." She grabbing my wrist, yanking up my plaid shirt sleeve, placing Cas' hand on my wrist, and I hissed as a burning abruptly scorched my skin, a street name, area code and address burned into my skin when she removed her hand. "You better be back within three days time or you know the consequences."

"What's to say you won't kill them while I'm gone." I said bitterly, ignoring Nira's sudden, strange smile, like she was proud of something.

"Don't you remember Emerald Eyes?" She cooed, and I froze up as she leaned so close our lips almost brushed together. "I keep my promises. I did truthfully give the location of Cas' grace, right?"

"After you knew he would trigger the spell that trapped us in the empty." I snarled. "It was a trap."

She pursed her lips, nodding.

"Fine." She pressed her finger to my forehead and I felt a slight warmth flow through me, similar to when Cas healed me, but the warmth was twisted, perverted.

"What'd you do?" I demanded once she was done, stepping away.
"You know how you were allergic to cats? I remedied that, but the moment I lay a harmful finger to any of your family - Doofiel included - the spell reverts."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why that?" I retorted, finding her idea of 'assurance' idiotic.

She rolls her eyes.

"Cats are everywhere, so no matter where you are, if there's a cat there, you can put your allergies to the test if you're in doubt."

I pursed my lips, not wanting to admit that the idea was a good one.

"So what am I getting?" I crossed my arms.

"That's a good boy," she purred, and I scowled. "I need you to retrieve for me this crystal."

Much to my displeasure, she abruptly pressed two fingers to my forehead, showing me an image of a blue crystal that looked like a galaxy, coloring blending in every which way and there were seemingly sparkles in it, like stars. The image was gone when she removed her fingers.

"You have three days to retrieve it."

"But it's in friggin South Dakota!" I retorted.

"Then I guess you'd better get a move on." She smirked, crossing her own arms. "Oh, and no Sam."

I scowled.

"Then what the hell do I tell him?"

She shrugged.

"Not my problem. You better get going. Time's a wastin'."

She was laughing as I turned away, stalking back towards the bunker.  

Once I got back to the bunker, it was a mad rush grabbing a change of clothes and necessary toiletries for my trip. I was also weak with relief to find the girls in the living room binge watching some skating anime that looked vaguely familiar to me, though Sam was nowhere in sight. I still couldn't decide if that was a relief or not. Once I had my things packed, I snuck to the garage, putting my things in the trunk when I noticed Hotep drinking some water in the corner. I decided to put Nira's little spell to the test, walking over to the cat and picking him up. At first, he wasn't too happy being disturbed from his task, but he grudgingly started purring like a car engine as I pet him.

Purr, purr, purr.

No sneezing.

Son of a bitch, it was working.
I put the cat back down, feeling a bit more appeased, but the knot in my stomach was still there. I pulled out my phone as I started the impala, shooting Sam a text.
Me: Going to be gone for the next three days. Gonna help a friend.

I sent the text, putting my car in gear then started pulling out of the garage, Nira/Cas returning to the bunker just as I was leaving, flashing me a wicked smirk that made my stomach twist.

Awesome...

I already had the worst feeling about this, but I couldn't see any way out of it in a way that wouldn't backfire on me. Nira had me pinned down in almost every friggin way, and I was pretty damn sure-

Wait a minute-

I stopped the car, putting it in park and getting out, rolling my sleeves up. Hell, Sam would be there any second and all I needed to do was just make the burns on my arm visible to Sam.

"Dean!"

Right on cue, Sam yelled my name, running up to me as I opened the hood.

"What the hell is this all about?" He demanded, glaring at me. "You're just up and leaving?"

"I'll be back in three days." I assured him, using my burned arm to hold the hood up, making it impossible for Sam to miss.

"Who is this friend anyway? I would've thought you would have wanted to stay here because of Cas!" He barreled on, oblivious to the gut wrenching alphabet soup burn letters on my arm.

"He understands." I shrugged, briefly checking the oil level in Baby before shutting the hood, scratching my left arm, no longer being subtle.

"Well... he didn't want to come?" Sam prodded, staring at me as if he was almost wanting for me to explode.

"No. Look, I gotta go," I gave up, backing away, making one last ditch effort by gesturing to Baby with my wounded arm. "He really needs help asap."

Sam sighed, looking at my arm briefly, and I sighed in relief.

Finally, you idiot...

"You don't want me to come?"

"No, I'll be fine. It's no big deal." I deflated, confused as hell.

Why couldn't he see the giant ass freaking burn on my arm? Was he blind, or was I crazy?

Or maybe Nira and I were the only ones who could see it...

Son of a bitch... this situation just got worse and worse by the damn minute.

"Fine... Whatever Dean." Sam grumbled, throwing up his arms in frustration and stalking off, obviously annoyed.

I sighed, at a complete loss. Guess it was time for plan B. That is, if I could come up with one.

Wracking through my frazzled mind for plan B, I got back in the Impala, continuing on.
A day and a half later, I made it to the location Nira gave me the address to. It was a farm much to my surprise; a place quiet and lonesome in the middle of practically nowhere, the closest neighbor twenty miles behind me.

Parking Baby in the dirt driveway, I got out, the low hum of insects filling the air. It smelled of dust and a faint hint of manure, though as I walked up the path towards the house, it smelled of the large rose bushes out front. It seemed like there was nobody home, not a car in the driveway and no sounds of a presence around.

The front porch steps creaked as I ascended them, and I half expected to hear voices in response to it, a dog barking, *something*.

Nothing.

Hesitating, I listened for a moment, still hearing nothing. Looking around leerily, I pulled out my lock pick, quickly unlocking the door. It revealed a simple but cozy house western style, and I again questioned who's house I was breaking into, and for what exactly?

I just feverishly hoped that I wouldn’t run into anyone and that this mission would be easy. Hopefully the magical gem or whatever the hell it was would be easy to find, and I decided that I should probably look for a safe first thing. A safe would be my best bet, especially already knowing Nira’s tastes, although I was still having trouble figuring out how she knew some cowboy in the middle of nowhere. It just didn't make sense, and besides, what could Nira use with a rock anyway? I quickly discarded the idea, almost feeling as if even thinking it was asking for the worst.

Quietly rifling through everything in the living room, I didn't find anything relatively interesting, and the trend continued into the kitchen and garage. I still didn't hear a sound, and it was so quiet, I felt as if I was the only person even alive. Despite that, I still couldn't help but feel as if something bad was on the cusp of happening every second. I almost felt the way I did as a kid whenever I dropped Sam off at Plucky Pennywhistle's Magical Menagerie to go hang out with girls and get a break. I was always worried that dad would find out and have my ass for it, and he eventually did of course. I couldn't remember a time when he had been more angry, and it was not a pleasant memory in my mind.

Even though the eerie feeling persisted, no one discovered me, and I went through the three bedrooms with no issue, and without finding the damned rock. I started wondering if this was a wild goose chase and Nira had just got me out of the house just so she could have an easy shot at Sam and the girls. The though made my skin crawl, and I was antsy as of a result.

*The one time you needed a friggin cat...*

Planning how exactly I would enact my revenge should my worst thoughts become reality, I came to the last room, a lavish office. The computer alone would've made Sam drool, and everything in there was the most sophisticated and expensive of the entire house. Now I had to be onto something for sure, because if I were to finally find that damn stone, it'd be here for sure.
Checking all the drawers in the desk and behind the painting of a horse, I was puzzled and nervous to find nothing. I began to panic, almost certain that Nira had lied to me, but I forced myself to take a breath, collecting myself. Maybe I had just overlooked something.

Trying to keep my mind clear, I checked the furniture and painting again. I checked around the computer and the drawers, when it suddenly hit me.

*False bottoms.*

Opening the first drawer again, I tapped it and felt around for a latch or something of the sort, but nothing. I started loosing hope until I finally found something, the bottom of the drawer falling open, the gem Nira had shown me tumbling into my palm.

"Awesome," I murmured, turning the gem over in my hand.

Although I had seen what it looked in my mind, the image Nira had given me didn't do it justice, as it twinkled and glimmered in my palm almost like a star on a clear, moonless night. It was actually beautiful, and I wondered if it had magical elements.

"Hands in the air!"

I jumped, startled, falling back on my ass as a result. I looked up to see a tall guy pointing a shotgun at me, his clothes covered with a thin layer of dirt and dust.

"Oh... I promise there's an explanation buddy." I chuckled awkwardly, slowly rising so I could crouch, but I froze as he cocked the gun.

"I *said*, hands in the air." The guy commanded harshly, the brim of a large cowboy hat hiding most of the guy's face.

"Look, I can explain," I said cautiously, slowly reaching behind my back to try and grab my Colt. I didn't want to make trouble for myself, but I also didn't want to be a sitting duck should the guy end up to be some freaky ass monster with a cowboy fetish.

"Put the crystal down nice and slow partner," the guy commanded, taking a half step closer to me. "And keep those hands where I can see em'."

"I can't, I need this. Lives are at stake if I don't bring it back." I explained, hoping to god the guy wouldn't give me grief.

Cowboy Monster scoffed to my surprise, shaking his head like as if I had just asked if math was related to science.

"Lives are at stake either way Mr. I can't let you take that."

I furrowed a brow, pausing my hand's slow journey to my Colt.

"What do you mean?"

"You really don't know what it is?" The guy sighed, long and heavy as if he was dealing with a rebellious teenager. "That my friend, is a piece from Pandora's Box."

"No," I scoffed a wry laugh, holding my hands up as I decided that the guy wasn't some monster as I stood to my full height. "No, that's just a legend."

"Just like how angels and demons are." I could only see the tip of the guy's nose on down, but the
irritated grimace on his face was all I needed to see. "Come on kid, put the crystal down and I'll let you go without pressing charges. Why don't you get a job to pay off your drug dealer or whatever."

"You're a hunter, aren't you?" I exhaled, relieved. "Look, I'll take good care of it, I just-"

"Don't give me the excuses, now put the damn stone down before I put a bullet in your leg and I don't miss." He aimed the gun at my leg, finger tightening around the trigger.

"Okay! Okay!" I said in a rush, keeping my hands up and carefully lowering my hand that was holding the stone.

*Son of a bitch, why couldn't this guy give me a break-*

Suddenly a loud metallic crash resounded from outside, and a symphony of dogs started these blood curdling howls outside like they had just see the murder of one of their own, and in the heat of the moment, I jumped, the stone tumbling from my hand.

"No!" Cowboy screeched, lunging towards me, hand wildly reaching for the falling crystal, but it was in vain, because the second it hit the floor, it sent a blue bolt of lightning towards Cowboy, and in a matter of seconds, it was over.

I blinked, in shock, Cowboy now a sizzling corpse on the floor, the stone sitting on the ground as pretty as I had found it, twinkling almost innocently.

*Son of a bitch.*

He was dead, and I was stuck with Cowboy Barbecue, a freaky ass stone, and an even worse realization. I had just inadvertently killed a man, and was about to deliver the Pandora stone to someone who'd sure as hell put that lighting feature to use. I couldn't let that happen, but I couldn't lose Cas or anyone else either.

Taking a breath, I left Cowboy Sizzle on the floor and the stone where it had fallen, rushing to the closest window to make sure no one else was coming. Luckily, it seemed like everything was fine, and it appeared that the metal door to a horse trailer had fallen open, four dogs sniffing around it. I internally prayed to god that they were friendly dogs, and turning around, I rushed to the kitchen. There, I grabbed a towel, using it to wipe down all my fingerprints from the entire house, hoping I got it all once I returned to the office. Tossing the towel aside, I tentatively picked up the stone, frowning at Cowboy Sizzle.

"Sorry man..." I said softly, grabbing the towel again and picking up the phone on the desk.

I hastily made a 911 call, alerting them of the body so that way the dogs wouldn't just be left to starve since god knew when the next time someone would come out here.

Cleaning my prints off of the phone, I stuffed the stone in my pocket, heading outside. I started getting nervous as the four dogs raced towards me, hoping to god I wouldn't have to use my gun, but to my relief, once they had all sniffed me, they just wanted me to pet them, all of them nudging and licking at me, and despite the situation, I couldn't help but smile at them.

"Hey guys... I'm sorry about your master." I sighed, rubbing the dog's closest to me - a Boxer I thought the dog breed was - head.

They of course didn't respond, merely snuffling and huffing loud breaths.

I frowned, feeling bad about leaving them, but I noticed an empty trough low enough for them to
reach, and before I left, I made sure it was full of water for the poor dogs that were already thirsty in
the hot summer sun.

I was quick to leave after that, not knowing how much time I'd have until the cops got there. It wasn't
until I was about twenty miles out, did I see an ambulance rush behind me when I turned left at a
crossroads, glad that the people in the ambulance didn't seem to see me.

I felt much better once I got on the freeway and into the clear, though I made a mental note to keep a
curse box in Baby in the future. It would've been damn nice to have now, as I was terrified of having
something else happen or possibly setting off the freaky ass rock that was sitting in my glovebox. I
wished that Cowboy Sizzle had been able to give me a tutorial on how to wield the friggin thing...
Maybe then I could've maybe had some leverage against Nira...

With a heavy sigh, I drove on, knowing I didn't have time to hang around or drag ass. I spent the
entire trip trying to devise ways to save my family and attempting to figure out how I could hide or
use the stone to my advantage, but nothing. I couldn't think of a single damned thing the entire drive
home, and I only succeeded in making myself more anxious and pissed.

I also started wondering how the hell I didn't see how wrong things really were, wondering how the
fuck I didn't think of it sooner. I didn't even look up what the sigil meant that Nira painted on the
floor the night we got Cas back, which I probably should've. I had just taken for granted that the
symbol had to do with opening the door to the empty, though now that I thought about it, it wasn’t,
not entirely. I had found and used numerous sigils to try and get to Cas from the empty myself, but
they either failed, or called for some freaky ass ingredient that I couldn't find, or refused to kill for,
and none looked like the one Nira had made.

I remembered how she said she had created the spell to, 'become one with Cas', and Chuck knew
what the hell she had used. I got angry with myself knowing that I couldn't drive back to Cali to get
another look at the sigil, as Rayne and I had destroyed the evidence so that way the cops couldn't
trace Nira's body back to us if they found it. Now though, I wished we had taken a picture of it,
looked closer at it, something. Then again, it probably would've been a waste of time since Nira was
sitting shotgun in my boyfriend's head at the time.

*Cas, please snap out of it...*

I sighed, thinking back to the trip he and I had taken before we waltzed into the empty. I had never
really spent time with Cas that long before without Sam present, and I remembered how nice it was,
despite how much I did enjoy Sam's company from time to time.

That week was the week I memorized what a full belly laugh from Cas sounded like, how his
gumline showed when he fully smiled. The week I more than likely started falling head over heels
with the son of a bitch.

I sighed wryly to myself, unable to help but smile a little at the memories.

Glancing over to the empty passenger seat next to me, the black leather seat illuminating a yellow-
orange as I passed under a streetlight, I made a vow to myself.

I would get Cas back. I would kick Nira's ass, and I would save my family. I would make it right, no
matter what the cost. Hell, if the price to pay was my life, then I would hand it over in a heartbeat. I
owed Cas and everyone else too much, and I was the reason for this damn mess anyway, since I had
killed someone named Astaroth apparently.

I hadn't gotten a chance to research this 'Astaroth', and only knew that he was 'In the shape of a
corrupted and fowl angel' as Cas had told me when I'd asked. It was crazy that that event was only two and a half days ago, as a large part of me felt that it was already a lifetime ago. It almost felt like I had fallen into a timeslip back to when I was still trying to get Cas out of The Empty. It was a jarring, disturbing feeling, and it made my stomach twist into knots. I could feel myself tightening into a terse coil wrought with terror and despair, and for the first time in months, I longed for the bitter serenity of alcohol. Hell, if I wasn't on a time limit, I'd stop and get a drink now.

I sighed, forcing myself to get back on track with my original thought process.

*How to end Nira and save Cas.*

There had to be a way, there was *always* a damn way! Why the hell couldn't I see it?!

Try as I might, I didn't cool down or think of anything useful during the drive, and it was frustrating, and no matter the plan, it always fell through. Refusing to help or trying to retaliate in some way would mean inevitable death for someone I loved, and I was never going to risk it. But I didn't want to steal by dropping bodies either, but if I didn't, I'd lose everything. Oh, but why not lie about the stone? Well, in my musing, I had realized something else.

Back when Nira was giving me ultimatums, she had mentioned that Cas could hear for like a thousand feet and read minds, then after she had erased my mind I had thought. She had to have, because she had mentioned testing out some of Cas' powers right before, and I hadn't even remembered this until this deep pondering I had gone into. So I virtually couldn't lie whatsoever, and I also realized I would have to be damn careful with my thoughts around Nira. I had to clue Sam in, but I wasn't sure how I could without Nira picking up on his thoughts if she/he happened to come in.

It was a damn tricky dilemma, and I decided to just put things off as long as I could and see if I could get the gem to a warded box I had in my room so that way Nira wouldn't be able to get it even if I gave it to her. Not until I had a chat with her at least.

Once I made it back to the bunker, I was sure to come in as quiet as possible, hoping to sneak to my room unnoticed. I made it into the garage with no issue, shutting off Baby early so I could coast in. I decided to just leave my clothes for the moment, just scrambling out of my car and rushing towards the door leading into the bunker as soon as I grabbed the stone from the glovebox. I cracked open the door and listened for a moment, hearing nothing and I snuck inside. I didn't see anyone as I rushed past the living room or in the library much to my surprise and worry.

"Dean!"

I jumped.

"Son of a bitch!" I exclaimed, rolling my eyes to see that it was just Claire. "Don't do that."

"Then what am I supposed to call you by then?" She retorted, crossing her arms. "Old skeezer?"

I stared at her in bewilderment, sighing in annoyance.

"I'm not an old skeezer!" I exclaimed.

She stared at me dully before sighing, smiling a little.

"Glad you're back."

"Thanks," I muttered, the weight of the stone in my pocket almost heavier. "Hey-"
"Can I ask you something?" She suddenly butted in, eyes cast down for a long moment before meeting mine again tentatively.

I furrowed a brow.

"Sure... Why, what's up?" I said tentatively. "This has nothing to do with a boy, does it?"

"Yeah, but yours," she rolled her eyes, face literally screaming 'I'll kill you for that', before she sobered. "He's been acting weird... Don't you think?"

"What d'you mean?" I said slowly, suddenly wondering if I should ask Claire for help instead of Sam. It'd be a hell of a lot easier to clue her in.

"Well... He's just been acting... weird..." She was frowning, shrugging anxiously. "Sam thinks I'm overthinking things."

"I know how that is," I sighed with a scowl, rolling my eyes at the wall when I saw her bored expression. "What?"

"Of course you do." She nodded once with a sigh, and I scoffed.

"Why do you say that?" I demanded, trying to remember a time I was with her and worried about Cas and confiding in Sam, but I couldn't think of one moment.

"Because you love him, you idiot," she sassed, her scowl like Laurie's in That 70s Show. "Now shut up and answer my question."

"Yeah." I answered tersely, giving up on even coming up with a retort.

I had thought Sam was bad mouthing shit to me at her age, but I was severely wrong. I inwardly wondered if she was really sixteen instead of twenty-four.

She nodded, seemingly relieved.

"So, do you know what's wrong then?" She queried, the scowl on her face softening.

It never failed to amuse me how Claire never failed to show emotion for Cas when any topic concerned him. She always got soft, gentle, just like how she held Hotep in the garage. Though I couldn't really judge, Cas made me the softest of everyone if I wanted to be the pot calling the kettle black.

"No, but I'm sure it's no big deal. He's probably just dealing with being Back To The Future'd." I sighed, lying blatantly to her.

I just couldn't do it. I couldn't involve Claire and risk getting her killed. God knew I already had enough blood on my hands, and I wouldn't add any more if I had anything to say about it. Although my motives were pure, I felt that she was already onto me. She had furrowed a brow at me, lips pursed in disbelief and hurt.

"Do you really think that?" She enunciated the word, peering at me as if she expected the truth to spell itself out on my forehead.

"Yeah, Claire, I really think that. Why, do you not believe me?" I crossed my arms, instantly regretting the question.

She gave me an incredulous look, throwing up her arms.
"Ain't no grass growing under your feet," she muttered, and I glowered at her. "Yes, Dean! And I asked you because I figured that as Cas' freaking boyfriend, that maybe you knew why he's been acting like some creep!"

"No, I don't, sorry." I snapped, turning on my heel and nearly swearing aloud to see Nira/Cas standing in the doorway, mouth in a thin line.

Great...

"Dean," Nira said in Cas' deep timbre, crossing his (her?) arms. "Weren't you going to tell me you got back?"

I didn't miss the look Claire shot me screaming, 'weird right?!'

I sighed as I turned back to Cas, plastering a faux smile on my face.

"Yeah, of course I was. Just got back." I half lied, and I realized I should probably greet 'Cas' in some special way, but I couldn't bring myself to move.

"Great," Nira/Cas said, smiling a smile as fake as Santa Claus. "Why don't we go for a walk? I wanna hear all about your trip."

"Sounds great." I said as enthusiastically as I could muster, glancing back to give Claire a reassuring smile, but she was already staring at the two of us suspiciously.

Yeah... No way in hell she was buying that.

"Let's go then." Nira/Cas said tartly, turning heel and walking out down the hallway.

I took a breath, mentally preparing myself for the verbal tongue lashing I was about to receive and was about to follow after Nira, when a hand pulled me back.

"Dean, that's not Cas!" Claire whipped me around to face her with surprising strength, hissing the words. "Something is wrong."

Son of a bitch, talk about deja vu... The words and look in Claire's eyes matched Sam's when he revealed to me that Cas was actually Lucifer all those years ago, and it was the worst kind of flashback ever. In that split instant, I knew that no matter what, I had to protect Claire, even if it meant making her doubt herself.

"Claire!" I exclaimed, steeling myself for the blow that I knew I had to make. "It's fine! You're overreacting, why don't you go try and find a case or something?" I muttered, hastily looking away from her crestfallen blue eyes and rushing down the hallway towards the garage.

I would burn for that. I was a dick for reviving that old insecurity of Claire's, and she'd sure as hell would never forgive me. Not that I deserved forgiveness anyhow. It made it worse that she had Cas' eyes, and it was like failing two people I didn't want to at once.

Running my hand over my face, I sighed deeply, trying to clear the cobwebs from my mind. I didn't need any evil bitch listening in on my thoughts. I decided to think about the stone, trying to keep it front and foremost in my mind as I caught up with Nira, who didn't even look at me as the two of us walked outside. I was expecting her (him?) to say something, anything, but she was silent as I tentatively trailed along behind her. Birds and cicadas were the only thing to break the silence, and it was almost eerie. I started getting the sense that I was walking behind a walking ticking time bomb, and I couldn't help but grow more and more apprehensive to whatever lay ahead. I was already
perspiring beneath the blisting rays of the early summer sun, and my nerves weren't helping the matter.

Wiping the sweat from my brow, I wondered again where the hell we were going, and I wished I had brought a water. Luckily there was an occasional soft breeze that brought seconds of relief, but it otherwise, it was a fairly boring and miserable walk. All I had to look at was dirt, trees and Nira in the body of my boyfriend, which I did my damnedest not to look at. It was hard though, especially when Nira/Cas was wearing one of my AC/DC shirts and those damn jeans that were form fitting from waist to the knee. I almost wanted to pretend that this was just any normal day and that Cas and I were just on a walk, but I just couldn't. Even though Nira was in Cas' body, she walked differently than Cas did, moved differently... Everything was different, but the same, and it left the foulest taste in my mouth from the despair and anger.

"So," The first word was said after the last ten minutes, Nira and I reaching the dock overlooking the lake by the bunker. "Did you get it?"

"Yeah..." I said slowly, stopping at the edge of the dock as I watched Nira walk to the edge of it, lazily peering around at the landscape.

"Well?" She turned to me, those blue eyes looking at me in annoyed scorn. "Aren't you gonna give it to me?"

She extended her arm, holding her right arm out to me, palm flat and expecting.

I hesitated, unable to get myself to reach into my pocket and just hand it over.

"What the hell do you want with it?" I demanded, the words falling from my mouth before I could stop them, and I found myself fearlessly getting in her face and staring her down. "I got someone killed."

"Oh boo-hoo." She scoffed with a laugh, stepping around me, and I turned to glower after her. "That's none of your concern. Now, the stone."

Her voice was cold and harsh, leaving no room for rebuttal, eyes equally as acidic as she turned back to face me.

"I don't have it." I boasted as confidently as I could muster, crossing my arms.

She stared at me a moment then burst out into the most cruel and demeaning laugh I'd heard in ages - probably ever - as if I was the most moronic person in existence.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" She was still laughing, wiping the edges of her eyes. "I know it's in your pocket Dean."

I balked, but I rolled my eyes, scoffing.

"No it's not." I lied, though I knew it was futile.


Still, I hesitated, though I put my hand in my right jean pocket, turning the stone over in my hands.

"Who else has to die?!" I demanded, ignoring her command. "What more do you fucking want from me?!"
"Oh Dean," she cooed scornfully, face completely deadpan as she looked me square in the eye. "Everything."

With that, she raised her palm towards me, and I was suddenly frozen. I couldn't move, and I was helpless to her advancement. My stomach twisted in such a fowl way, seeing the picture of very evil on Cas' face. It would've given the me before being with Cas nightmares, worrying if that would happen to him someday. But then again, I'd probably have that nightmare now anyway if I was going to survive this very freaking moment!

Then just as suddenly as she had charged me, she stopped, waving her finger and I found my own arm pulling the stone out of my own pocket. I was powerless to stop myself from dropping the stone right into her palm, and she smiled so irritatingly at me.

"Thank you." She said pleasantly with a smug smile, taking a step back as she gently examined the stone between her fingers.

"What do you want with it? Looks like a regular old stone to me. Why, I'd bury it and call it a day!" I suggested, though the dubious look on her face subsequent to my words said it all.

"Oh Dean, I'm sure you'd love to know." She murmured absently, redirecting her gaze back at the stone for a brief moment.

"So, what now? You want an outfit?" I snarked, crossing my arms.

"Why Dean," she redirected her gaze to beam at me, her palms together as she held the Pandora stone. "I'm glad you asked, but first-"

She reached out, yanking one of my arms out, white hot agony flaming through my veins the second her fingers touched my bare skin.

"That," she hissed over my gasps of pain. "Is for trying to tell Sam earlier. I saw you trying to show him the burns I gave you." She smirked, wicked intent gleaming in her eyes like the reflection on a knife. "It was a test, and you failed."

She clicked her tongue, squeezing her grip tighter around my wrist, and I cried out, crumpling to my knees with the excruciating pain. My skin felt as if it was being pressed against a burning hot pan, and my insides... I felt muscle cramps everywhere. My neck, my feet, my hands... I was completely immobile, and I was certain that she was going to kill me. Or if she didn't, the cramps surely would.

Cas... Sam... The girls...

Then just as quickly as the pain came, it left, my skin almost sickly cold as Nira retracted her hand.

"That's for not listening," she said tersely, fistng her fingers in my hair and forcing me to look her in the eye as she yanked my head back. "Now, you have another job, and I want you back within five days."

She grabbed my left arm, a stinging beginning in the center of my forearm, and amidst the pain, I saw the burn letters on my arm fade. I watched my skin turn pale with freshly healed skin for a few seconds, then the burning started anew as new letters and numbers rose up in red and blotchy skin. It was over seconds after, a new state, city and address now burned into my skin.

"Las Vegas?" I whined, not wanting my favorite gambling utopia to become off limits.

Monster cases rarely popped up in Vegas, and the one time I remember a case going down there,
another hunter had told me that she was taking care of it. I didn't know why monsters rarely bothered Vegas, but I didn't care. Either they were as smart as monsters could get and had a system in place like the wanna-be monster gangsters in Chicago, (I hoped it wasn't that) or they liked occasional gambling just as much as me. It was one of the few places I could go to have unabashed fun without worrying about somebody recognizing me, but if Nira was sending me there, there was little doubt that that status would remain. I also wasn't going to be out in the middle of nowhere anymore, so I had to be more careful.

"Yep," she affirmed all too enthusiastically, as if knowing how this would end already. "I want you back asap. Oh, and you're getting me this."

She was pressing her fingers to my forehead before I could say anything, and immediately the image of a small, crude looking knife came into my mind. It seemed oddly familiar, almost as if I had seen that kind of rough craftsmanship before. It reminded me of-

"Why are you still standing there?" Nira demanded, the image disappearing along with her fingers. "Get going."

I blinked, recollecting my thoughts.

"The others will see that as weird though." I pointed out, taking a step backwards when she advanced.

"It's none of their business." She purred, following my each step back with one forward, until I could go no further unless I wanted to jump into the lake. "Oh Dean," she cooed, reaching up and brushing something off of my t-shirt. "There's no escape from me no matter how hard you try."

I said nothing, ignoring her as she traced her finger along the Blue Oyster Cult design on my t-shirt.

"But I do see your point," with a dramatic sigh, she stepped back away from me, and I exhaled the breath I hadn't realized I was even holding. "Taking Sammy along will keep our cover."

"You mean yours, princess." I grumbled, looking away when she shot me a glare.

"No, I mean ours," she enunciated the word very clearly, stepping back into my space and wrapping her arms around my neck. "I mean, you do want your angel back, don't you?" She ruffled my hair before turning away, prancing down the dock.

"Yeah, when is that exactly?" I challenged, crossing my arms and staring at her back.

She stopped in her tracks, shrugging.

"Who knows." She laughed over her shoulder, walking off down the path back towards the bunker with a tiny, delicate wave of her fingers. "Take Sam if you have to, but be back in five days or else. Oh, and don't tell him. You know the consequences."

A blink of an eye, and she was gone.

I sighed, dropping my head in my hands.

I wanted to scream, to admit that it was hopeless. I wanted to kill Nira, and I was still livid over this entire situation, but what could I do? She had me boxed in virtually in every way possible. There was no way for me to retaliate without setting off the shock collar. I couldn't save Cas without getting my family killed, but it was hard living with myself allowing Nira to use Cas' body as a home.
I hated this entire situation. I hated Nira, and hated myself for ever getting involved with her; for being so naive and weak. Hell, I was mad at myself for killing this Astaroth, and I had no idea who the hell he was. I was angry, spiteful, and worried as all hell over everything, and yet in an odd way, I still couldn't wish that I had never met Nira.

Without her, would everything between Cas and I ever have become what it was now? Would it have ever grown, or would I still have been the same scared son of a bitch in denial? Things were the way they were between us because of Nira. She had pulled us together and apart so many times, I'm sure some Cupid out there was jealous of her finesse. It was hard fully damning her no matter what she did because of that, but I was tired of her influence. I wanted to just for once, feel like the things happening between Cas and I weren't attributed to her, though if I wanted to be honest, that wish was long since out the window.

I guess what I really wanted at the end of the day, was the constant worry of her dropping a nuclear bomb on both my life and relationship any second, to be over. I'd be damned if I let her continue to have the control, and I was going to take it back.

Just as soon as I figured out just how exactly I would do that...

With a heavy sigh, I headed back to the bunker.

"What do you mean you have to leave again?! You just got back!" Sam demanded as I packed extra clothes in my duffel bag that was still in the back of the Impala.

"I mean, I have to help a friend out and get something." I sighed, shoving the clothes into the bag before zipping it up. I'd be damned if I had to do laundry on the road, because it was nothing but a pain in my ass. The one time you needed quarters, change was always in short supply.

"Who?!" He roared, and I was almost certain even Chuck could hear him from wherever the hell he was at.

"You don't know her." I muttered, patting my pockets for my keys. "So either shut up and let me take care of this, or pack a bag and hurry up."

Finding my keys in my back pocket, I pulled them out as I heard Sam indignantly huff at that, turning on his heel and storming out of the garage. I knew what his decision was, and I exhaled, deciding to hastily throw the ice chest together while Sam packed.

Grabbing the green ice chest off of the shelf in the garage, I hastened my way towards the kitchen, the damned thing banging against my thigh the entire way. It was irritating, and I almost wanted to leave without Sam, but I knew I'd only have hell to deal with once I returned. It'd be better to hash this out now, besides, maybe I could clue Sam in. Though, I should probably check Baby to be sure she wasn't bugged...

Walking into the kitchen, I nearly ran into Rayne, the two of us narrowly avoiding getting the pink liquid of her smoothie all over us.
"Oh, hey." She laughed, stepping to the side to let me pass. "You heading out again?"

"Yeah," I nodded, stepping around her and setting the ice chest down on the metal counter we had set up.

"Where to now?" She asked, sitting at one of our barstools while I opened the freezer, pulling out the ice tray and dumping the ice into the ice chest.

"Vegas." I answered, shaking the last of the ice free before restoring the ice tray to the freezer.

"You just gonna talk to me in words?" She laughed, and I caught a glimpse of her shaking her head before taking a sip of her smoothie as I opened the fridge.

"What, do you want a dissertation?" I managed to muster a smile on my face, loading the ice chest with beer and a few snacks while she chuckled.

"No, of course not. You just seem tense. Everything alright?"

I exhaled heavily, closing the fridge and shutting the ice chest lid with a slam.

"Nothing you can help with." I gave her a weak smile, putting all my weight against the ice chest.

She frowned, getting up and walking around our makeshift island and pulling me into a warm hug.

"Well, you got Cas back, and your brother and everyone else is safe," she said gently, rubbing my back soothingly, though I couldn't quite bring myself to hug her back. "Whatever do you have to be blue about?"

"I can't tell you..." I whispered, wanting so badly to spill everything to her then, but then Sam appeared in the doorway.

"Let's go." He said tartly, pulling his duffel bag higher over his shoulder before he headed down the hallway in the direction of the garage.

"Gotta go." I muttered, pulling out of her embrace, but she tightened her grip, preventing me from leaving.

"Hey, one sec," she said firmly, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look her in the eye. "Dean, I love you to death, but sometimes, you're so far, I feel like I don't know you-"

"Rayne, I really don't-"

"Dammit, listen to me!" She exclaimed, and I quieted, stopping my struggles. "Dean," she began again, gray-blue eyes locked in mine. "I love you just as much as everyone else under this roof, but sometimes, you gotta let people help you. I know that stewing over things is your style, but if there's something you need to get off of your chest, then please tell someone you're comfortable with telling. I hate seeing you get all grumpy like this." She admitted, patting my chest before pulling back with a small smile.

Unable to help from being warmed at her concern, I held my arms out to her for a hug, and she wasted no time in hugging me in return.

"Thanks." I gently squeezed her for a moment, enveloped in her strawberry scent before we pulled away.

She smiled at me, squeezing my arm gently. "It's no big deal. Now, you better get going." Stepping
back, she jerked her head in the direction of the door with an infinitesimal smile.

Shooting her an answering smile, I picked up the ice chest and took my leave. Rushing to the garage, I was relieved to see that Sam was already to go at least, though the class A bitch face he had going proved that this drive wouldn't be an easy one.

Putting the ice chest in the backseat, I rushed to get in the driver's seat, cranking on the engine.

"So would you mind-"

"I have a question to ask you." I interrupted, and Sam went dead silent as I drove the car out of the garage.

"Uh," he stammered, obviously thrown off. "Sure... What?"

"Hold on..." I muttered, realizing that Nira could still hear us if she happened to be listening in.

I internally swore as I was reminded that I hadn't checked the car for bugs, and I made a mental note to check the car when I stopped at the gas staton to fill up Baby before we hit the road.

"What-"

I raised a finger to my lips, catching Sam's eye very deliberately before I spoke.

"Y'know, I found gum in here the other day," I said, hoping to god Sam would catch onto my faux story. "It was stuck to the floor, so I wondered if it was you, or me who got gum stuck to their shoe."

Risking a glance over at Sam, I could see the obvious lack of comprehension on his face, and I started panicking, hoping to god he wouldn't blow our cover. He said nothing though as I stopped at a stop sign, and I was relieved to see the comprehension dawn across his face the next time I looked over at him.

"So, you have gum stuck to your shoe..?" He asked tentatively, and it was obvious by his tone of voice that he was hoping that he had misunderstood my meaning.

"Yeah, though you do too." I admitted, and his face was pale as I glanced over.

He said nothing more for the next twenty minutes, and although the nervous tension between us sucked ass, it was far better than having Sam pissed at me.

I wondered during our silence if Sam had figured out on his own what was going on. He was one of the smartest people I've ever known, and it wasn't like there wasn't some clues as to what had gone down. I'm sure he was probably still doing research at the bunker about Cas while I had been gone, and I was damn curious to know if he'd found anything, because anything at this point would be a godsend. It was probably a far fetched idea though, since Sam had most likely been researching all the wrong things. It wasn't like he would've guessed the return of Nira, because I sure as hell hadn't.

"Are we going to stop for gas?" Sam broke the silence between us as the first inklings of town grew up around us.

"Yeah." I nodded, slowing the car as I neared the gas station I frequented.

Sam didn't respond as I turned into the gas station, sloppily parking the car next to the closest gas pump. The second the car was in park, I shoved open the door, shoving my hand in the crack of the seats and feeling along it for any strange obstruction. I knew this damn car from the ground up, and
rebuilt and repaired it probably more times than it was worth, but never had I appreciated my intimate knowledge of my car more than I did now.

"Dean, what the hell is going on?" Sam exclaimed, not controlling his tone as I moved on, feeling underneath the seat.

'Check the car.' I mouthed to him, not trusting speaking aloud for fear of being heard.

I wasn't sure if he got that or not since I had gone back to the nerve wracking task at hand, but I was relieved that he had when sam pitched in, feeling around the passenger seat.

I found nothing on the seats, so I moved on to check the backseats, underneath the floor matts, the sun visors, everything. I even checked the engine, wheel wells, and beneath the car. I felt every crevice, every hole and dip of the entire car, even double checking the areas Sam had inspected, leaving no engine part unturned.

"Dean, what is going on?!!" Sam exclaimed as I shut the hood, satisfied that there was no hex bags, freaky coins, or listening devices anywhere on the Impala. "You're freaking me out."

"Nira is alive." I sighed, grabbing the gas pump. "She's possessing Cas."

"S-she-" Sam stammered, eyes blinking furiously with disbelief. "What?"

"That day when she brought Cas back? It was just a friggin Vulcan mind meld with Cas." I sighed heavily, wondering why it was taking so friggin long to fill the tank. "She's been using Cas' grace this whole time to cloak herself, and she's blocked Cas' memories with it. That's why he couldn't remember anything or use his mojo."

Sam exhaled, and if the situation wasn't so dire, I might've laughed at the bug-eyed expression on Sam's face from the shock.

"Wow..." He finally said slowly, brushing his hair back. "This whole time?"

"Yep." I grumbled, thanking god when the gas pump clicked, and I took out the gas pump, replacing it while I pulled out my wallet.

He shook his head, running a hand over his face, and I looked away to pay, wondering why the hell gas was so friggin expensive...

"Why?" Sam finally said, face twisted in a mix of anger, confusion and bewilderment.

"Apparently because I took everything from her, whatever that means." I rolled my eyes, taking the receipt and walking back around the car. "Let's go."

"So," Sam went on as the two of us got in the car, and I was pleased to hear Baby roar to life with new fervor as I started her up. "She told you all this?"

I nodded, making sure the coast was clear prior to heading towards the exit.

"So you don't know why?"

"No, Sam! Besides, don't you think I would've led with that important piece of information?" I answered irascibly, growing annoyed with his questions, though I couldn't put my finger on why.

"Dean, everything is going to be fine."
"How?!" I demanded, shooting him a glare, annoyed to see that stupid puppy dog look on his face, the same one he gave all our innocents when he was being sympathetic. "Don't you think I've been working my ass off trying to figure this out? If there was a way, I would've found it."

"I don't know if you know already, but Claire already started suspecting something was off, so I thought it wouldn't hurt to look into things, although I found nothing useful now that you've told me what's been going on." He sighed, and I saw him stroking his chin out of my peripheral vision. "So, does this have to do with these last minute trips?"

"Yeah," draping my wrist over the steering wheel once we got on the freeway, I could feel Sam's gaze on me as he waited for elaboration. "She told me that I needed to get these things for her or all the usual threats villains give." I half lied, not wanting to paint a picture for Sam of the gory details of Nira's ultimatums. "I have five days to get this knife thing now."

"For what?" Sam exclaimed, voice high and shrill with anger. "Why does she want you getting stuff for her?"

"For nothing good, and she likes me about as much as the Capulets liked the Montagues."

Sam gave me a look, and I scowled at him.

"Hey, I read! Anyway, I don't know is the answer you're looking for."

Sam sighed long and heavy, the one I knew all too well when our livelihoods were in peril yet again.

A part of me half wondered why I bothered with this life. Hell, it cost me my entire life. I couldn't realistically get married, have kids, or anything to do with normalcy really. I'd given it all up, and what did I get in return for it a majority of the time? Dead loved ones, threats, cuts and wounds so deep, I'd forever be scarred no matter what medication or method I tried, even if I expedited them moments after the event happened. This life killed my family, obliterated my childhood, and forged me into something I never wanted to be. I lost more than I ever gained, and now I was about to lose the most I'd ever gained in this horrific life with a snap of a finger...

"Hey," I cleared my throat, trying to shove aside my black thoughts. "Do you know who Astaroth is? I haven't gotten a chance to do any research about him."

"Yeah, I know you haven't." Sam pointedly stared at the two prominent hickeys on my neck with a devious smirk, and I shot him a glare. "And yeah, Ruby told me about him."

"Ruby?" I spat the name, now Sam was shooting me an exasperated look.

"Remember those three women a couple years ago before the apocalypse who said they were doing a bookclub, but were really doing witchcraft? That time when Ruby saved your ass from that spell?"

"Oh yeah..." I drawled, remembering how the two women had come to learn that they had unwittingly sold their souls to the demon possessing their friend. "The Charmed wannabes."

Sam gave me another strange look, but continued.

"Yeah, so I asked Ruby about it later on, and she told me that it definitely wasn't going to get you a pass in hell... She told me that he was Azazel's second in command, and ruled after you killed Azazel, though it was total anarchy when Lilith rose to power."

"So... I killed him?" I clarified slowly, a horrible realization dawning on me.
"According to Ruby." Sam nodded, and his brows were furrowed. "Dean, what are you getting at?"

"Remember when we hunted that ghost last week?" I asked, my words coming in a rush as comprehension dawned on me. "Remember it's motive?"

"Uh-huh..." Sam nodded slowly, though I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was trying to follow me. "He was possessing couples that abandoned other lovers for their current ones."

"Exactly, which means we've been looking at this all wrong. Y'see, we thought all this time that ghost possessed Cas because of my relationship with Lisa, but it was actually Nira that ghost was latching onto."

"True..." Sam agreed, horror suddenly dawning on his face. "So... does that mean-"

"Nira and Astaroth were cozy back in the day? Yep."

"But that doesn't fit the ghost's motive." Sam pointed out.

"It doesn't," I amended with a waggle of my finger. "But, out of the three- er, four of us there, who had baggage closest to the motive? It's not the first ghost we've dealt with that's gone kamikaze on us."

Sam was silent a few moments, and he was rubbing his eyes when I glanced over at him.

"Dammit..." He muttered, exhaling. "That explains everything. An eye for an eye..."

"A heart for a heart I think you mean." I sighed, resting my elbow on the door so I could lean against my palm.

"Dean, we're gonna save Cas. We'll fix this."

"How? I have a friggin demon's ex-girlfriend piloting my frigging boyfriend's body!" I yelled, the stress and anxiety getting to me, and I couldn't stop the furious shaking in my hands.

Sam said nothing, and I couldn't bring myself to look at him.

I knew what I'd find anyway, and it definitely wasn't the answer to my dilemma.

I was royally screwed this time, and there was no getting out of it. I had to face it.

I'd lost Cas for good this time.
Hey all!

Hope all is well with everyone, sorry for the long wait. Been doing some traveling and I finally got my first tattoo that was inspired by my first con when I met Misha, so I'm still super stoked about it, haha. Life has thrown me a few curveballs as well, so I've taken the time to handle it the best I can. *sigh*

I'd like to thank you all though for commenting and reading this story. I truly appreciate being able to do something I love and have others enjoy it as much I do, so thank you!

I'm nearing the completion of writing this book and series as well, and it has been such a journey since I started it back in 2016. I'll be honest and say I'm putting off finishing this a little bit, because once it's finished, it's finished. Just like growing sad over finishing a good book, I grow the very same kind of sadness when I come near to finishing a book.

Thanks to all of you that came on this journey that I've written, and I wish you all the best. :)

Enjoy!

- Destinee

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**Fifteen**

The entire drive to Vegas, Sam and I took turns driving, researching on his laptop, and napping.

We discussed ways we could save Cas, though we couldn't come up with anything useful, especially since we didn't know how Nira had even done her spell to get under Cas' skin in the first place. It was just impossible, and with each theory and idea we scrapped, I grew more and more despondent. Despite Sam's assurances that we would figure it out, I started feeling like that promise was a hopeless one, and if feasible, it wasn't without the cost of loosing someone I cared about.

I could tell Sam was trying to distract me with tidbits of information he found on the blade we were currently on our way to steal, but I just couldn't focus on anything. Scenarios of the worst kind kept leaking into my mind no matter how hard I tried ignoring them, and they haunted me. I couldn't stand the idea of Cas being killed, and I refused to confront Nira and risk the others.

I wanted to desperately go back in time to erase all of this. To go back to that bar with the knowledge I had now and rip her friggin lungs out. To go back in time before Lisa and Ben's deaths and find her first. See how the bitch liked getting her skin peeled off herself. I wanted either that, or some divine intervention of some sort.

I got so desperate, I even prayed to Chuck behind a gas station while Sam refilled the impala towards
the end of that day, but of course, the son of a bitch didn't show. Guess he was too good for a show of gratitude, the bastard.

I was running out of ideas fast, and my chest was a knot of anxiety and terror. I could hardly keep my mind off of Cas, wondering if he was okay and if he even knew what was happening at all. If he did know, could he not break free? Was he trapped in his own mind and body? Or did he really not know at all like Nira said, just living out some poor reproduction of reality?

The millions of scenarios pained and aggravated me beyond belief. It was all I could do just to keep my hands from shaking as I drove, Sam long since passed out next to me when he realized sleeping in a bed tonight wasn't happening. I was just too damn wound up and worried to even think about sleeping. Plus, it was probably for the better, since the bitch gave me a damn deadline like a friggin teacher and informed me over a phone call that she could, "sense whether or not I had the blade."

I wasn't going to risk pretending to steal it after that.

I sighed heavily, shifting in my seat. I glanced over at Sam, who was still passed out, slumped against the passenger door, snoring softly. I was glad at least one of us could sleep, though I didn't know how he could, considering his girlfriend, Claire and Rayne were all still back at the bunker. With that bitch...

Yet again, I saw red being reminded of Nira, and while I was still livid over the situation, now, the anger had become a numbing feeling. I was almost acceptant of it, just letting myself drown in it. Why should I act like there was a way out of this? I'd been gnawing at this question for two weeks now to no avail, and even my own brother was stumped. Chuck wasn't going to help me, and no one else would. I'd played all my cards, and I'd lost.

It seemed after all these years, I'd lost to a damn witch who had an addiction to sadism.

Wait...

"Son of a bitch..!" I exclaimed aloud, hope flooding through me as Sam jumped awake beside me.

"Dean?!” Sam said sharply, whirling around in his seat to take quick stock of his surroundings before looking back at me. "What's going on?"

"I can't believe I didn't think of it before..." I laughed weakly, shaking my head before I glanced over at Sam, who was looking at me like I was insane. "Sammy, I'm gonna need you to make a call."

"My, my, you boys really do have your hands full."

Rowena smiled mischievously, daintily sipping her cup of tea, pinkie finger raised as she did so.

I rolled my eyes, leering at the ultra fancy restaurant Rowena agreed to meet us in. Despite wearing
our fed suits, Sam and I were still severely underdressed, as everyone there was walking in after
leaving their Ferrari or whatever with the chauffeur and wearing necklaces or watches expensive
enough to set Sam or I up for years. The place reeked of fancy colognes, perfumes, and robust pride.
Delicate, breakable decor littered the entire restaurant, and it didn't help with my anxiety, as I felt as if
I had to be aware of my every movement and breath, lest I break something. The starch white table
clothes, square plates and friggin palette of various forks, spoons and knives didn't welcome me any
more than the artistic, revered decor. I mean, who needed two different kinds of forks and spoons
just to friggin eat?! And who the hell thought *square* plates was a great idea? In what world did
square plates make less sense than towels for napkins?

"Not really," I replied sarcastically now, sliding my thumb up to the safety lever on my gun, which I
had pointed at Rowena beneath the table. Guess the table cloth was good for one thing after all.
"Other than this gun with witch killing bullets I have."

Rowena rolled her eyes, and I heard Sam sigh besides me.

"No need to get nasty dear," she cooed as she daintily put her cup back on its little circle (how did
that make sense when the regular plates were square?) plate. "I want that know-it-all dead as much as
you do."

"Sure you do." Sam scoffed lightly.

Narrowing her eyes at Sam, Rowena picked up her tiny white tea cup again, soft steam slowly rising
up from it.

"Do you want my help, or not?" She remarked lowly, a threat on the edge of her voice while she
took another dainty sip of tea.

I exhaled, trying to keep my temper in check. "Fine. What can you do then?"

"'What can I do'?!" She repeated with an incredulous laugh. "Oh, what *can't* I do? The book of The
Damned has made me a force of nature."

"Oh *good* for you," I sniped. "Answer the damn question."

"Someone didn't have their tea today." Rowena raised her eyebrows and giggled, picking up her
spoon - the smallest one - to stir her tea. "Or, their morning kiss?"

"Shut up," I snapped, her smirk just barely showing over the rim of her cup making me angrier, even
though I knew she had no idea how close to the truth she really was. "*I will.*"

"Dean." Sam said in a warning tone, and I felt his hand rest on my forearm in accordance to it.
"What can you do, Rowena?"

"Well," she brushed her voluminous curly hair back, a small smirk on her face. "What's in it for me?"

"Your life." I hissed, cocking my gun, Sam exhaling in exasperation besides me.

"What do you want then?" Sam asked, his hand on my forearm the only thing holding me back at
this point.

"To keep The Book of The Damned and the promise that the two of you lumbering piles of flannel
won't come after me to retrieve the book." She smiled smugly, her cup clinking against her circular
plate as she put it back down. "Do we have a deal?"
"Deal." I said without hesitation, and I saw Sam look at me sharply out of the corner of my eye.

"Dean, can I talk to you in private?" Sam hissed, the stupid smug smile on Rowena's face growing bigger in response, and it made my blood boil, reminding me of the similar smile Nira donned.

"No," I replied sharply, shooting Sam a glare before looking back at Rowena. "So, how do we stop this bitch?"

"I know a wee spell," she shrugged, as if it was no deal, even though the hope of getting Cas back and killing the bitch made me high. "All you have to do, is place the hex bag I'll make in the palm of her- er, his, hand."

"So it won't affect Cas or his vessel?" I clarified.

Rowena gave me a look that I couldn't fully identify, but it was close to sardonic amusement.

"Of course dearie," she cooed, a hint of a smirk tugging at her lips. "It will merely expel Deyanira from his vessel and incinerate her essence."

"Sounds like a plan to me," I nodded. "So, when are you handing over the hex bag?"

"I have to gather a few things first," Rowena's brows furrowed slightly with thought. "I could have it to you boys by tonight. Let's say we meet back here at ten?"

"Deal. See you then." I ignored her smirk at that, getting out of the chair I was sitting in. "Let's go Sam."

I could hear Sam scrambling to follow me as I started walking towards the exit, his chair scraping across the floor the loudest sound in the room even over the low hum of conversations. I knew that he was going to be pissed at me, but frankly, I didn't give a damn. This was finally the answer I'd been searching for, and feigning a promise wasn't so hard anyway.

"Dean!" Sam called after me in exasperation the moment he and I were outside, and he easily caught up with me. "What the hell was that?! We can't let Rowena have The Book of The Damned!"

"Do you have any better ideas?" I retorted as we approached the chauffeur, and I briefly asked for my car before turning back to Sam once the snide chauffeur was gone. I waited, but Sam said nothing, his lips in a defeated frown. "Yeah, that's what I thought," I rolled my eyes, ignoring Sam's offended huff of breath at that. "Besides, it's not like we can't try to get the book later anyway."

Classic to form, Sam gave me one of his bitch faces, clearly adverse to the whole idea.

"Look, I know you want Cas back, and I do too, but at what cost is too much Dean?!" Sam demanded, his voice loud in the quiet, though I could vaguely hear the thrum of the Impala's engine in the silence of the parking garage.

"As far as I'm concerned, we got off easy." I remarked as I crossed my arms. "Now, either quit your bitching, or go back to the motel. I have work to do."

With that, the chauffeur pulled up in the impala, putting the car in park and getting out to hand me the keys. Taking them, I didn't miss Sam's heavy sigh behind me as I walked around the front of my car to get in. I didn't need to be a mind reader to know that that sigh meant that although Sam hated the idea, he wasn't about to let me do it alone. Of course, he didn't say anything to confirm that to me once we were both inside the car, but I knew.
A museum. Complete with security, surveillance cameras, and motion detecting equipment. That's what I had to break into now for a freaking blade.

Although investigating crime scenes and covering up our own illegal acts was all but a breeze for Sam and I, Ocean's Eleven style stealing wasn't exactly our forte. Granted we were wanted persons for far too many things, but I wasn't entirely thrilled with the idea of adding it to my list of misdemeanors nonetheless. The risk of getting caught was high, and I was not looking forward to possibly resurrecting myself in the authorities' eyes. Sam and I had managed to stay out of real trouble with the cops for quite a few years now, and I wanted to keep it that way. It was already hard enough to just stay alive on the daily, I didn't need the added stress of the cops looking for our asses.

So, Sam and I came up with a plan.

After some extensive research, breaking into the museum's surveillance camera feed and overlooking the blueprints, we began to strategize. The blade was in a glass case in the center of a circular room, which luckily, was close to the entrance, making for an easy escape. We ultimately decided to rent a small van and leave the impala at the motel, both for the stealth, and if the plan happened to go awry, the cops would be looking for said van instead of the impala. Sam was going to be inside the van with his laptop, being my eyes as he would watch the surveillance footage to warn me if any of the security guards were headed my way. He was also going to play a loop on the cameras that I would be passing, giving me ten minutes to break the blade out.

Meanwhile, I would have to sneak in undetected, and deactivate the motion detecting alarm on the case, then retrieve the blade and run back out. From there, Sam and I would drive back to the motel, ditch the van somewhere along the way, then get in the impala and back on the road to Lebanon after we got the hex bag Rowena was making us.

It was a simple plan, but god knew how quickly it could go off the rails.

The museum closed at six, so we decided to wait until nine that night to break in. In the meantime, Sam and I parked the van in the parking lot of the park across the street to eat some dinner to continue observations and wait it out. Now that we had some downtime for the next twenty minutes, the tension between Sam and I from earlier that day revived itself. It was almost impossible to ignore it since the two of us no longer had anything to talk about concerning the case, and I knew our meal of Five Guys burgers and fries wasn't going to stave it off forever.

"You gonna act constipated all night?" I remarked finally, unable to take the tension any longer since Sam had done nothing but stare at the floor of the van with that damned look on his face.

Sam shot me a glare, averting his gaze seconds after as he took a long breath, one I knew was the foreshadowing to a heated argument. He then folded his arms, and my suspicions were confirmed.

"So, we're not gonna talk about the fact that you're letting one of the most powerful witches walk
around with the most powerful spell book around?" Sam snarked with a scornful huff.

"Like I said earlier, we don't have to keep that promise. We've used people before. Hell, I thought *you* of all people would understand." I scoffed, shaking my head as I thought back to Sam's soulless days when he shamelessly used me, Meg, Crowley, and virtually everyone around him. "Stop actin' like you're a fuckin' saint..."

Sam pursed his lips at me in acquiesced annoyance, glancing out the van window.

"You've just been so reckless lately Dean," he sighed, frowning as he looked back at me. "The-" his voice wavered. "Alcohol poisoning, being stupidly reckless in hunts, and the way you killed yourself that one time on that hunt we-" he broke off, lip quivering as he took a breath, looking out the van window again for a moment before looking back at me. "And the torture you did for Crowley."

I furrowed a brow, confused as to where he got his knowledge of that.

"Rayne told me." Sam said listlessly, eyes glazed over with discontentment and disappointment, and it made part of my gut twist.

"Fine, so you know. So what?" I challenged, unable to help from getting defensive.

"Dean, you *do* realize Cas isn't the only one to love you, right?" He said simply, the sentence not even a question, but a statement.

I rolled my eyes, shaking my head as I picked up my soda.

"Yeah, I know." I snapped, taking a sip of the fizzy liquid.

"Do you?" Sam challenged. "Because I think you don't."

"What the hell do you want me to say Sam?!" I yelled, annoyed.

"I want you to stop acting like dad!" Sam yelled back with twice as much fury. "I want you to stop being so reckless Dean!" He paused, closing his eyes for a moment and taking a deep breath for a moment before refocusing in on me, voice calmer. "Look, I get how hard it is to lose someone, and I can't imagine what it's been like to see him die so many-"

"Sam." I growled, warning him.

"Times." He finished, carrying on shamelessly. "I've only seen Jess die once, and it messed me up for years, Dean. It still hurts at times." He admitted, voice soft as he stared at the floor, remembering the girl I only had a vague image for in my mind. Looking back up at me, I felt my throat tighten to see the glassy sheen in his eyes. "But I kept on fighting, because I had you, and it wouldn't have been fair to you if I let myself get killed in some stupid situation. But you're not fighting Dean, not really."

"What the hell do you mean 'I'm not fighting'?!" I spat, completely bewildered and offended by his words.

"Tell me I'm wrong Dean." Sam challenged, turning his nose up at me. "You'd never let Rowena have that book any other day. You believe you're going to die, and you want to if it means living without Cas. Because you think Cas is dead."

"No I *don't.*" I hissed, livid at how jarring his words were, and I was even angrier to discover that they *did* strike a cord in me.
I hated it, but I realized that yet again, Sam knew me better than I knew myself. He had put into words my deepest fears and inner subconscious decisions, but quick to human nature's tendency to retain a hopeless dream, I denied it.

"Cas isn't dead, you son of a bitch." I snarled, my blood boiling. "You just want him dead, don't you?"

"Cut the crap Dean! I'm right, and you know it!" He snapped, glaring daggers at me, now encroaching my space.

"Would you like a gold star, genius?" I retorted sardonically.

"I just want you to give a fuck and remember that others love you and would miss you if you were gone!" Sam screamed, the force of his voice filling the tiny space like an explosion, and we both were dead silent after.

I didn't know what to say, and I swallowed thickly as Sam leaned back in his chair. He was no longer looking at me, a resigned look on his face as he looked at his watch.

"It's nine. You should go." Sam said suddenly, waking his laptop up from it's place on the metal table screwed into the wall of the van.

I blinked, still a bit shocked by his outburst, but I collected myself.

"Yeah, okay." I muttered, turning around to grab my black gloves and my gun before I headed outside the car, the door slamming shut behind me loud in the silence.

It was dark and balmy outside, and I double checked my back pocket for the ski mask I had stuffed away in my back left pocket, nodding to myself as I felt its familiar thick fabric. Although Sam and I were fairly sure things would go to plan, Sam and I ended up deciding to buy ski masks should the plan go awry and I be caught. Then, at least I'd have a chance to escape and leave no more clues other than my gender, height, and weight.

"We all good, over?" I feigned scratching my ear as I tested out the tiny earplug Sam and I bought at this electronics store earlier that night so we'd be able to communicate as I crossed the street.

"Yeah," came Sam's clipped and terse voice clearly over the line.

I sighed to myself quietly, careful to keep my head down and attempting to stay as inconspicuous as possible while I neared the museum.

"The front cameras are on a loop," Sam's voice suddenly informed me. "You're clear to try and unlock the doors, the night guards are on the opposite end of the building."

"Copy that. Over." I quipped, taking a quick glance around the street, making sure no one was in sight as I pulled out my lock pick, thanking the gardeners of the museum for putting a giant oak tree right by the entrance, and I was mercifully somewhat hidden in it's encompassing shadow.

Finding no one around, I set to work, wasting no time on testing the door lock with my lock pick, it already proving to be a challenge when I could barely even twist my lock pick when I tried. I couldn't help but feel like every second someone was going to jump out, guns drawn and flashlight blazing in my face as a pair of handcuffs winked mockingly in the low light. I knew it wasn't going to happen without warning, since I kept looking over my shoulder and had Sam watching my back and front from the van right across the street, but even that realization brought little comfort.
“What’s taking you so long?” Sam bitched suddenly over the line, and I rolled my eyes as my lock pick slipped.

"Hey, if you wanna pick a friggin security grade door, be my guest," I hissed. "Over."

He sighed.

"Why do you keep saying ‘over’?"

"It's radio communication etiquette, Sam." I sighed in aggravation, ignoring his stupid sigh of annoyance at that. "You say ‘over’ when you're done talking, ‘copy that’ when you understand something, and-"

"I get it." He interrupted sourly.

"I didn't say over." I quipped, grinning as I twisted my lock pick and heard a lovely click in response.

"You know what-"

"I just got this door open," I interrupted before he could launch into another one of his bitch fits. "How am I lookin'? Over." I whispered as loud as I dared while I slowly eased the door open, hoping to god it didn't squeak. Sam had already disabled the alarm earlier from his laptop, so I wasn't worried about setting anything off.

"Stick to the left hallway, a night guard is heading towards the right one," Sam coached me as I followed his instructions, my eyes adjusting to the dim light. "So far, they haven't noticed the loop on the cameras."

"Good." I murmured, taking a quick glance at the museum map on the wall to make sure I was still going the right way. "Keep me posted. Over."

"You really don't have to keep saying that."

I rolled my eyes and chose to ignore him, sneaking my way past a mammoth exhibit.

"How am I looking? Over." I whispered, rounding a corner and nearly jumping out of my own damn skin as I nearly ran into a wax figure of a sailor from the 1900s.

"As long as you don't-" His words were cut off by laughter, undoubtedly as a result of what I had just done.

"Oh, it was pretty funny." Sam laughed breathlessly, and I could almost picture the son of a bitch wiping the edges of his eyes.

"It won't be that funny when I stick my foot up your ass once I finish this." I growled, Sam's snickering over the line aggravating, but welcome to hear after the earlier incident.

"I think you ought to save the ass stuff for when you get your husband back." Sam replied, his words just barely discernible over his laughter.

The word 'husband' threw me off my tracks, and I stopped dead center in the hallway, the stuffed Saber Tooth Tiger staring at me with concerned marble eyes.

"Dean?" I vaguely heard Sam say over the line. "What's wrong? Why'd you stop?"
I blinked, shaking my head, remembering that I was on the clock as I hurried to refocus back on the task at hand.

"Nothing." I whispered, relieved to see the sign for the ancient artifacts room, the room where the blade I was about to steal sat.

Silence aside from my soft footsteps on the tile floor.

"You know I was joking...right?"

"Yeah," I mumbled, following the signs to the artifact room, the blade in its bulletproof glass case revealing itself to me as I stepped into the doorway of the room.

_Bingo._

"I didn't me."

"Sam, just drop it." I hissed, pulling out my lock pick. "Watch my back."

He didn't reply, but I knew he'd heard me.

Sweat was pouring down my backside as I fought to unlock the case without setting everything off, and it felt as it every second was hours. My heart was racing so hard in my chest I could hear it in my ears, and my fingers shook just enough that my task was made even harder by my nerves. I hated every second of it, hated the fact that the plan could go off the rails any second, and that the cops would be after us should I fail.

_Click._

Suddenly the security panel for the electronics swung open, and my adrenaline flooded my senses like I had just gotten high.

"Sammy, I'm in." I whispered, a grin plastered across my face as I carefully cut the wires Sam told me to.

"Make it quick Dean, you've only got four minutes left."

"I only need half of that," I smirked, cutting the last wire and tucking my wire-cutters in my pocket, hastily swapping them out for my screwdriver.

Last step was to unbolt the bulletproof glass from the stand the blade sat on, grab the blade, and get the hell outta dodge. Or so the plan was.

I made quick work of the screws, stuffing them in my pocket lest they fall on the floor and attract unwanted attention. Once they were all free, I pulled the glass case off, carefully setting it on the floor as I grinned at the blade, and fuck, even though I didn't want to be stealing this or delivering this blade to the bitch I was forced to work for, the adrenaline rush that accompanied a successful steal was like drug. It made you high and giddy, and feel as if you were invincible. I had experienced it many times over the years, and it never got old, despite the fact that I was morally against stealing for the most part. It was an intoxicating feeling you couldn't help but like, even if secretly. I would go as far as to say that it was akin to a nun thinking about or being teased with the prospect of sex; the one thing you know you shouldn't have for so many reasons but for the life of you can't fully banish it from your secret thoughts or desires. Stealing was much the same for me, and while hunting was something I would never give up, I had a feeling that if there was such a thing as alternate universes (and one that wasn't some freaky ass angel hallucination) with duplicates of me in each one, I would...
bet cash money in saying that one of those versions of me was a fucking badass criminal Ocean's Eleven style.

Having put the glass case cover on the floor, I reached out to collect my bounty, grabbing the blade and pulling it off the stand it sat on, and then-

**BLEEP. BLEEP. BLEEP. BLEEP.**

Lights suddenly flashed on, and an annoying siren resounded throughout the building the moment I took the blade off of its stand.

*Shit!*

"Get out of there Dean!" I heard Sam yelling over the com links, and I swore, tucking the blade into my jacket pocket before running out of the room back the way I'd come.

"Son of a bitch!" I groaned as I ran down the halls, yanking the ski mask out of my back pocket and hastily yanking it over my head, which wasn't exactly easy to do when you're running full fuckin' speed like the Roadrunner.

"Hurry up Dean!"

"Don't you think I'm trying that?!" I snapped, narrowly dodging a security guard who lunged for me from the opposite hallway from me that connected to the hallway I was hauling ass down.

Sam didn't say anything - which was probably better - and I would've exhaled in relief when the front doors to the museum revealed themselves before me as I rounded yet another corner if I wasn't so damn breathless already.

*I was getting too old for this shit...*

"Dean, watch out!"

Sam's warning reached me a moment too late, for the next thing I knew, I was falling backwards, being slammed onto the floor on my back. All the air left my lungs in an instant, and I struggled to get air back into my lungs like a fish on land. A big, burly security guard smirked above me as he raised his right hand to his mouth, where a communication device of some kind was fastened to his wrist.

"Don't worry Ruth, I've got him."

I heard the clink of handcuffs, and vaguely an Irish sounding woman's voice in response to his announcement. My breath was starting to return to me though, and I gathered my strength, preparing for the right moment.

"I know, if it weren't for that pesky security guard you would've gotten away with it." The guard laughed, reaching down and grabbing my arm, hauling me to my feet like I was a rag doll. "Time to take the mask off."

Still holding me in place with an iron grip, I felt the tips of his fingers graze against the back of my skull, and I knew my anonymity was on the fast track to being public knowledge.

*ZAP!*

The guard dropped.
I gasped, stumbling wildly from suddenly being released, and from the guard suddenly slumping against me. I landed hard on my ass, wheezing a grunt from the impact, and my eyes met my little brother's eyes the same moment, a used taser in my brother's hands.

Son of a bitch...

"You really could've warned me..." I grumbled, unable to hide my proud grin as I shoved the limp guard off of me, who was starting to stir.

"Shut up, let's go!" Sam barked back at me from under his own ski mask, but that couldn't hide the twinkle in my brother's eyes, and I knew right then our camaraderie was back.

Without waisting another moment, we darted through the front doors like bats outta hell, my adrenaline almost intoxicating me as I realized: We're gonna make it, we're gonna make it, we'regonnamakeit-

Suddenly, an explosion of light, blinding me on the spot.

My vision cleared, and I was met with about five guards from what I could estimate in those split seconds.

Shit...

I heard Sam shriek as one of the guards tried to take him, but missed.

Then I realized every other guy had a taser too.

Shit!

I didn't like being cynical, but our odds were hella low. Two unarmed guys against five all armed with tasers? Ha, yeah, Sam and I would have to pull a Houdini to get out of this one...

Despite our odds, my mind still kicked into high gear, refusing to go down without a fight. The one benefit was that all the tasers they held were single use only... So maybe if I could get them to waste their charges...

The guard closest to me lunged.

I narrowly dodged out of the way, the burly guard activating the taser, and I could feel the electricity pulsing from it as I stumbled out of the way.

Sam wasn't so lucky.

My heart went cold the instant I heard him shriek, and I turned to see that while he had dodged the guard that was coming after him, he had failed to miss the guard that had been coming after me.

Son of a bitch!!

Sam dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes, and I began to panic, wondering just how the hell I was gonna get myself out of this. I didn't have a hope of grabbing Sam and hauling him outta there, dude was a freaking moose that somehow got bigger than me even though he was the little brother.

How the hell did that happen anyway?

"Come on man," one of the guards said, the five of them clustering around Sam and I, the tasers all pointed at me. "It's over."
"Not quite yet dearie."

A flash of purple light, and one by one, every guard was out cold on the ground, snores rising up in the air.

I blinked, looking up to see Rowena standing there, the snoring pile of guards at her feet.

"What're you doing here?" I spat, struggling to catch my breath as I dropped down to help Sam.

She sighed in exasperation, rolling her eyes.

"A little gratitude would be nice," she shook her head, brushing her hands off. "We don't have much time, can Sam walk?"

"Sammy?" I ignored her, lifting my brother's head up onto my lap. "Are you alright?"

He groaned, making very stiff and languid movements. He managed to press a hand to the back of his scalp, which I noticed was bleeding slightly from his sudden descent to the pavement.

"I'll live..." He grumbled, and I patted his shoulder.

"Can you walk?"

"Boys, better move it." Rowena pressed, her orange hair flying in a flurry over her shoulder as she turned towards the sound of distant police sirens.

I turned back to Sam, who was struggling to stand, but failed, and I hastily draped him over my shoulder, grunting as I hauled him to his feet, secretly grateful when Rowena draped Sam's other arm on her shoulder, helping me steer him back towards the van. Once we did the heinous task of reaching it, (hey you try hauling Sam around...) I grunted to Rowena that the door was open, and she yanked it open, the two of us hastily helping Sam inside, who was just now starting to regain use of his body. The sirens were getting louder, and I scrambled to get into the van, irked when Rowena jumped into the passenger seat, slamming the door shut.

"The hell you think you're doing?" I hissed, shoving the key in the ignition, though I didn't turn it.

"Do you really think we have the luxury of time to debate?" She yelled. "Move it!"

The sirens were loud enough to heard inside the van though, and I twisted the key, the engine gunning to life. It barely had a chance to turn over before I was throwing the van in reverse, pulling a rather decent J-turn if I do say so myself, before hauling ass out of that parking lot. Tires squealing, we raced away from the scene of the crime, and just as we turned the corner, I could see blue and red flashing lights my review mirror for a split second before it was gone.

*We were going to get away with it!*

"So," I glanced over at Rowena, who sat in the passenger seat as comfortably as a dog sprawled out over a bed. "Why the rescue back there?"

"Well, I had to make sure my assets were safe."

"You Crowley now?"

She gave me a dubious look at whatever she saw in my face in response.

"He is my son."
I sighed, rolling my eyes.

"Great, well," now that we were reasonably far enough from the crime scene, I pulled over to the side of this shabby alleyway, stopping the van. "Now is the part where we kick you out."

"I'm not going anywhere," she said decisively, settling into an even more comfortable position. "You boys are in over your heads, and you could use all the help you can get."

I glowered at her. "Like I'm really going to believe you suddenly became The Good Witch of The South."

"You're not the only one who despises Deyanira," Rowena said darkly, a venomous, bitter edge to her voice. It oddly surprised me to hear it. "It's time the witch burns."

"Wow, a witch wanting to burn another witch. Wouldn't that make you a traitor?" I smirked, keeping my eyes and ears peeled for any cops prowling around. Sam and I had to get back to the Impala...

*Time was ticking...*

"Drive, Winchester." Her voice was full of warning, her 'evil witch' voice appearing in full force.

Had we had the luxury of time, I would've told her the van wasn't moving one inch until she choked up some information, but we were not so lucky. So I did, putting the van in gear, heading over to the spot where Sam and I had stashed the Impala earlier that day.

"I'm driving. So, what's the story?" I pressed, trying to veil my curiosity with forcefulness.

She stayed silent, and she was staring out of the passenger window when I glanced over at her. The silence spread over us like a fog, growing thicker and thicker each second she remained silent. A fresh feeling of dread flooded through me, and I grew more and more uneasy as I waited for her answer, weaving down street after street. I had this sense that it wouldn't comfort me, and I could feel how clammy my hands were over the steering wheel because of it. Next thing I knew though, my right hand was being grabbed, my palm being flipped over and something velvety was placed in my palm before I could react. I looked over to examine it, finding a purple velvet wrapped hefty sized hex bag now in my possession, tan leather cords neatly tying it shut.

"There, I held up my end of the bargain." Rowena avoided the question, but I could feel my blood start to boil, knowing in my hands, I held the key to Nira's demise.

*The key to getting Castiel back...*

"What are you going to do now?" I decided to relinquish my questioning for now, and though I would never admit it, deep down, I was so damn grateful to Rowena in that moment, I would've bought her flowers.

"What were you boys doing robbing a museum?" She countered, and I could feel her accusatory gaze on me.

"I think this chat has gone on long enough," I arrived at the motel Sam and I left the impala at, parking the van off in the back behind the dumpsters to keep it hidden longer. As soon as I had the engine turned off and the van parked, I snatched my pistol from beneath the seat, aiming it at Rowena square between the eyebrows. A sick rush of pleasure filled me at the obvious fear in her eyes for that brief second before her usual mask took over. "Now, tell me where the Book of The Damned is if you don't want a bullet lodged in your skull."
I ignored my brother's surprised protest to this.

Rowena just looked at me like I was impotent.

"I won't give it to you, and if you shoot me, you won't find it." Her smug smile did me in.

I paused, slowly, deliberately putting the hex bag she gave me safely in my jacket pocket, zipping the pocket shut. I could sense the awkward tension in the car, could sense Sam's apprehension as he awaited my next move, and hear Rowena's shallow breathing. I didn't miss the infinitesimal move she made to press her hand against the side pocket of her loud, bright red overcoat.

I lunged.

I pinned Rowena to the seat, her shocked gasp and my brother's rebuking exclamation amplified in the small space of the van. Rowena fought against me, her fingernails scraping against my cheek so hard my skin burned, but I ignored it. Pinning her to the seat with the weight of my body - having no remorse for what pain I was improbably causing her - I frisked her, going straight for the pocket I saw her seemingly grow concerned about. She kicked at me, forcing me to stop to pin her down, her livid threats flying out of her mouth left and right.

Then she started chanting.

I shoved my right arm against her throat, efficiently cutting off her air, and her words.

"If you give me that book right now, I'll let you walk away with your life," I hissed, her wide eyes frozen on mine in fear, something that made a dormant part of me - the part of me that remembered hell - relish. That part of me even found pleasure in it...

Still, she stubbornly refused, bravely continuing to fight against me. She couldn't really writhe against me from the way I had her pinned down, but she could move her arms, but I had already made certain that I pinned her wrists, so her efforts were futile. I knew it was only a matter of time before she would give in, because she was running out of air fast, and I wasn't letting her get much at all, only enough for her to manage a whisper. Her skin was turning white. I was starting to get worried that she was actually going to force me to kill her.

"Okay," she choked out, her movements becoming more languid. I could feel how much weaker she had become under my grasp.

I removed my arm from her throat, Rowena choking on the sudden intake of air as I pulled the Book of The Damned from her coat pocket. I handed the book over in Sam's direction, not once taking my eyes off of Rowena.

"If you try to come after that book," I felt the book slide from my grasp as Sam took it, my voice as grim as Death himself, "I won't be so gracious in letting you live."

I kept her pinned down for several moments longer, my glower while staring into her eyes unrelenting. I made sure I drove my point home. I wasn't fucking around, not anymore after Nira.

In retrospect, I believe a part of me snapped that day.

For the first time, she submitted to me. She dropped her gaze from mine, and I knew I had hit my mark.

Oddly enough though, guilt for my abrasive actions began to flood through me, and I quickly released her, sitting back in my own seat. I bit my lip, staring unseeingly out the door window, the
glow of some orange streetlight vaguely capturing my attention. I had just enough composure left to say two words:

"Get out."

In a heartbeat, the passenger door was shoved open and slammed shut almost simultaneously. She was gone.

The silence screamed in the moments following that, and I didn't realize I was waiting for Sam to yell at me until he spoke, though not in the way I had been subconsciously expecting.

"We better get going." He said softly, the scraping of his backpack over the metal table in the back ringing out before it was drowned out with him opening the door.

It took me a second to shake off the heavy energy from earlier, but I got into gear once I took a breath. I grabbed the last of our gear then shut the van, locking the keys inside for kicks.

Pulling the second duffle bag over my shoulder, I headed towards the Impala after my brother.
Sixteen

Sam didn't say a word to me about what happened. Not for the first couple hours of driving anyway. (Only five hours left to get home in time for Nira's deadline, but we were making good time.) He wore a constipated expression and it deepened when I played the Yardbirds to mask the tension.

When the tape ended, that's when he finally spoke.

"Dean..." I knew from the careful way he said my name that a talk was on the way. "Was what happened back there really necessary?"

I sighed.

"We have the book now though, don't we?"

"Yes, but is it at the cost of another enemy? The end doesn't always justify the means, Dean."

"She won't come after us," I scoffed. "She knows we're probably the only non witches out there that can hand it to her just as good. Even if she does get one of us, the other will finish the job for damn sure."

Sam inhaled deeply in that way of his when he knew it was the truth, but didn't want to admit it aloud.

"Who's side are you on?" I accused, though only in my tone. I knew who's he was on, but sometimes, irascibility can debilitate your willingness to cooperate.

He looked over at me wearily. "You know it's yours."

"Then what's your problem?"

He said nothing, and when I looked over at him, I was oddly infuriated at how that damn constipated look was on his face again.

Judgemental bastard...

"Spit it out Sam," I spat. "Don't be a coward."

Sam whipped his head up to look at me, real anger flaring in his eyes now.
"Fine, you want the honest truth Dean? The truth-

"Yeah, come on," I spoke over him, unable to help from egging him on. "Tell it like it is."

And that's about as far as we got.

In the heat of the moment, I had veered slightly onto the medium, successfully running over something that caused a raucous pop to seemingly explode from everywhere inside the car. By that time, I had steered Baby back into the center of the lane, but it was too late.

The front right end sat lower than before, and the car began to shake from imbalance.

Fuck... You have to be kidding me...

I pulled the car over, coming to a stop as fast as I could to keep from further damaging things. The minute I stopped Baby, I put her in park, then threw open the door, reaching the scene of the crime before Sam even got there, and he was closer! (His disrespect astounds me at times...)

"Son of a bitch!" I swore, a jacked up flat tire being the culprit.

We were out in the middle of bumfuck nowhere, and when I checked my phone, I had no service.

And that was a bitch, because I had no spare tire.

Four hours and five minutes left, and we still hadn't made the Kansas border.

Awesome...

_____________________

Things went to shit.

It seemed everything that could go wrong, was going wrong.

It took thirty minutes of walking back the way we had come just to get a signal, and it got worse because neither of us could find a towing company open at one in the morning. Still calling around, we made it back to the podunk town Sam and I had passed through about an hour ago, hoping to god someone would be able to help us. Sam finally got something promising when we reached a gas station, and I left him to it as I went inside to try and see if I could buy tires anywhere at this hour.

In all, it took two fucking hours for the tow truck to arrive, hitch up Baby, and pull her back into town. We were getting down to the wire too, with only two hours left to spare.

And things just kept getting worse.
In this dustbowl of a town, there would be no place available to sell me tires until morning, and even though the lady at the gas station was kind in giving Sam and I directions to an affordable motel a few blocks down, I let her words go in one ear and out the other, because I could only think one thing.

_We weren't going to make it..._

"I have to call Nira," I said to Sam after we walked out of the Gas station, pulling our jackets tighter around us. Fall was coming again. "She has to know we're not going to make it..."

Sam's countenance grew colder - which was already cold from our unresolved spat from earlier - and he nodded.

"Do it."

I nodded, pulling out my phone and calling Cas' number, trying to ignore the wicked twisting in my stomach at the thought of what was about to take place.

"What." It killed me to hear the ill regard in the form of my boyfriend's voice.

"I won't make your deadline," I cut straight to the point, trying to avoid looking at Sam, as if somehow that would protect him from Nira's reach further. "The Impala got a flat, and I can't get it fixed until morning."

Laughter started to filter through the phone, and I furrowed my eyebrows, feeling Sam's quizzical gaze on me. I could almost hear him thinking at me, _"what's going on?"

"Oh Dean, you're silly," she said, yawning a very bored sounding yawn. _"I don't care."_

I paused a moment, waiting for her to say more. I _expected_ more. For her to ask if I had the blade, to repeat her threats but saying she'll give me more time. I'm not sure why her response surprised me. Maybe it was because I was exhausted.

"I can't make it." I said flat out, as if that fact wasn't any clearer.

"Oh, of course you can Dean," she purred. _"I know exactly what you Winchester's are capable of. You mean to tell me that you can stop an apocalypse and save the world from God's squabble with his sister, but not meet a deadline because of a simple flat tire?"_ She laughed ruthlessly. _"I'll give you an extra hour to find a new car to steal, but that's it. I'll see you in five hours."_

Then the line went dead.

"Son of a bitch!" I yelled, startling Sam with my outburst.

"What happened? What'd she say Dean?!"

I shoved my phone in my back pocket, running my hands over my face wearily.

"She gave me an extra hour to steal a car," I felt so _angry_, muttering into my hands, "she seems to think I'm a fucking wizard and can overcome anything since I saved the world more than once."

Sam scoffed, his face incredulous when I looked back at him.

"She's insane."
"Yeah, no shit Sherlock..." I dropped my hands, shaking them out, as if that would shake off these raging emotions inside of me. "I guess I have no choice..."

"Go," Sam urged me without hesitation. "I'll stay behind, get the Impala fixed and drive it back as soon as I can in the morning."

I hesitated, seeing the logic in his words, but I had this feeling that he needed to be with me when I walked into this storm. I wasn't sure if I was feeling this sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach from the current stresses, or if my intuition was trying to tell me some dark shit waited for me...

"You sure?" I finally said for lack of better words, unable to say what I was really feeling, partially because I didn't know how to voice them, and because I didn't want to make Sam feel even more on edge like he probably was.

"Yes," he nodded, urging me on. "Get out of here. I'll be right behind you."

He met my gaze, and I knew in that moment even though I said nothing about how I felt, he already knew. The tension between us from our fight dissipated entirely, and somehow, I knew it no longer mattered anymore.

"Be safe." I told him, stepping forward to pull my brother into my arms.

He embraced me in return, and I smiled at that familiar tickle I always got on my neck from his hair. I didn't want to let him go, crippled by this strange fear that this would be the last time I would see him in one piece.

"You too Dean." He said as he pulled back, flashing me a small, but genuine smile of encouragement.

I felt rooted in place as I watched him walk away. Down, down, down the sidewalk, his huge form illuminated orange under a street lamp, seemingly making him glow like an angel for a split second, then it faded, and he was a man again. I felt an extreme punching blow of loneliness when he rounded the corner, out of sight.

Steeling myself, I got my feet to move again. I jogged off across the street, off in a race against time.

Thirty minutes later, I had a steaming coffee in hand, and a stolen car.

It was a piece of shit, some old decrepit mini van that was sitting out in a used cars lot. It fired up though, and that was good enough for me. I knew I hardly had any time, and I shut off the radio, the glowing green numbers of the clock on it making me so anxious I felt I could vomit.

Cas, Cas, Cas...
Rayne, Claire and Jazz...

Sam...

Castiel...

Their names rang throughout my brain the entire ride home, over and over.

Please let them live... Don’t have them die because of me...

God, god, god.... Keep them safe...

My mother told me angels were watching over me... Could you all please watch now just this once?

Oh god.... please don't make me bury them...

I thought of all their laughter, all their smiles, burning the images of them inside my brain. I remembered what their laughs sounded like, what Cas' eyes looked like when he looked at me... I remembered the jokes Claire told me that I never understood, the pictures Rayne took of us all and how she always showed me the photos first, and the deep, in depth conversations Jazz and I had about physiology, and the behaviors of people. But mostly, I remembered Cas.

I remembered his laugh, his smile...

I remembered his bravery, his fearlessness in doing whatever it took to save me or my brother. I remembered every year I had spent knowing him, right from the beginning.

I remembered the nearly choking pressure in the air from the electricity in the barn that night I first met him, the first time I felt his healing touch, and the first time I found myself leaning upon his shoulder in the emotional sense.

I remembered all his sacrifices, all his deaths, all the torture he had endured in the name of saving the world.

And in saving me.

I felt myself shatter inside, blinking furiously to see the road in front of me.

I'm coming Cas...

I'm going to make this right...

Please god... Don't take more from me...

_____________________

I didn't know how much time I had left to spare when I pulled into the garage of the bunker. I wasted
no time though in getting out of it, fully prepared to rush inside to show Nira I had returned and that she could hold off on the bloodshed.

I wasn't prepared for her to already be there.

I almost ran into her (or him) in my haste, just barely coming to a stop in front of her, my boyfriend's arms crossed.

"You're late." Nira growled out.

"I came as fast as I could," I gritted out, unconsciously clenching and unclenching my fists.

"I'm sure that's true," she nodded. "But still, you failed. Do you have what I asked for?"

I wanted to rip Nira out of Cas' body, and I was inwardly seething being in her presence again. Rowena's hex bag sat heavy in my jacket pocket still, and I kept it in the forefront of my mind, ready for any opportunity to use it.

"Yes."

She smiled, but strangely enough, it wasn't Cas' smile. Not at all. Despite her being in the same body, when she smiled, the effect was completely different. This smile was snake like, cunning, and deceitful. It was the smile of a calculating thief. I wondered how it was possible that anyone else (aside from Claire) hadn't noticed for themselves.

"Good," she praised me, some of her pissed off-ness easing in her features.

I saw movement behind Nira/Cas, and I noticed Rayne in the doorway.

Oh god, don't come in here...

"Why don't we go for a walk?" I suddenly said, hoping to god that she wouldn't make her presence known.

I didn't know why, but I had this undeniable push to keep everyone as far from us as possible... There was something in the air that made this feel like a ticking time bomb, and I hoped to god that I wouldn't be right, but it was better safe than sorry.

"You know," I continued, plastering a faux flirtatious smile on my face as I looked into the blue eyes of my boyfriend's vessel, not recognizing them one bit. I hoped that my act of creating a 'private moment' would be enough to keep Rayne at bay. "So we can watch the sunrise."

Rayne hesitated in the doorway. Nira/Cas, smiled.

"Aren't you the romantic," Nira said, and I almost sighed in relief to see Rayne quietly make her exit at the same moment. "Lead the way."

So I did.

I turned my back to her, trying my damnedest to ignore this tingle in my spine, the hair on the back of my neck standing from this strange tension. The air held a similar energy to the vibe that would proceed a major thunderstorm. That electricity in the air, that crackle of nervous, volatile energy. Every part of me screamed bad, bad, bad as I opened the door, but I felt as if I was outside of myself, just watching myself lead Nira outside of the bunker. Watching myself like I was in a film, watching myself lead her down, down, down the trail towards the dock, the sky turning a navy blue
as the sun grew closer and closer to peaking over the distant horizon.

I suddenly had the mental image of walking myself to the gallows for my own death. I tried the shake off the feeling.

I had the upper hand, didn't I? I held the key to ending all of this right here, and right now in my pocket.

*So why did this feel all wrong...?*

"Enough," Nira said, stopping the minute we reached the dock, palm out. "Give it to me, before I decide to slaughter everyone in their beds for you being late."

"Fine," I said, some part of me going cold and detached as I reached down to my jacket pocket, mindful to angle my hand in such a way that I covered my pocket as I unzipped it.

My heart pounding, I reached into my pocket, the velvet brushing against my fingertips.

I couldn't look away from the vessel, at the body that had become unfamiliar without Castiel piloting it. Everything seemed to slow down to be analyzed frame by frame.

How many times had I seen those blue eyes, looked out of by different entities?

*How many times did I have to find that the enemy wore a familiar face?*

Everything felt so slow, so utterly lucid. I took in the burnt orange the sky was becoming, the way the vessel stood silhouetted against the backdrop of the dark looking trees, and unending sky. It reminded me of a tarot card reading I got from a physic once, before I went back to get Sam, and before this whole mess started. I had saved her from getting killed by a vampire, and in return, she gave me a tarot card reading. I didn't really heed her words then, and I don't recall all that she said, but to this day, I remember what she predicted.

I remembered her flipping over that final card, the smoke from the sage she had burning curling and sweeping over her fingers in a ghostly fashion in the same motion. She had sighed, pursing her lips, staring at the card somewhat grimly.

"An ending is coming for you, or a betrayal," she had said, and I remembered feeling locked in place as she pushed the card towards me.

*The card depicted a rather grim picture of a man murdered on the ground, ten swords stabbed along his body. Black clouds hung over the grisly scene, though it appeared that the sun was rising despite it all.*

"You cannot stop this event, and you will not be prepared for it," she continued, my eyes flicking back up to meet hers, though I remembered how her's had locked onto the card in front of me.

"Allow this to happen though, for the sun always rises, no matter how dark the night."

The sky depicted in that card, and the haunting, desolate feeling it gave me, was seemingly created in reality now, as the sky looked very much the same behind the the vessel I both knew and didn't know.

I could see it blink at me, and I wrapped my fingers firmly around the hex bag, heady determination flooding through me.

I felt the wind blow, tickling the side of my face, and ruffling the vessel's hair.
I would never reference it to Nira again.

"I'm waiting," it spoke, impatiently putting its hand out, palm upwards.

It couldn't have been made more perfect.

I met it's eyes, a suspicious glare starting to arise upon its face. Silence spanned out between us, and I found myself breaking the silence, voicing to my incredulous feelings.

"I've waited so long for this," I said, confusion furrowing the vessel's brows.

I dropped the hex bag in the middle of its palm.

Time stopped.

It looked down at what it now held, a sudden shriek escaping it, and I was astounded to recognize it as Nira's actual voice.

_Son of a bitch, it's working!!!_

So caught up in my elation, I didn't account for the fact that she still had control of the vessel, preparing to throw the hex bag into the lake.

"No!" I growled, lunging forward to pin the arm down, but I was a fraction of a second too slow, as she still managed to throw it, but only a couple feet away.

"Ohh Dean," Nira's true voice still came through, fighting hard against me as I fought to pin the vessel down in some way. "It's a good thing you have the blade, it's the last thing I needed."

"I don't have it," I grunted when she managed to punch me in the jaw, refusing to let go of the hold I had on the body's left arm.

And it was true, I didn't. I left it with Sam for this very purpose.

"Oh you don't?" Suddenly I was kicked between the legs, and I collapsed to the ground in blinding pain, cursing at her dirty tactics. "So then dear little Sammy has it, doesn't he?"

I struggled to get ahold of myself, gasping when she disappeared for a split second, and returned moments after, the blade I had left with Sam now in her hands, covered in blood, the excess languidly dripping to the ground in front of me.

My stomach sank.

_Oh god... No... Sam... Oh god Sam..._

"How did you-"

"None of you can hide from me, not after you delivered me the Pandora Stone." She grinned like a lunatic. "Hope you didn't leave dear baby Sammy in discord."

I was cold.

"You didn't kill him..." I scoffed, eyeing the hex bag lying a mere two feet away from me when she looked away to examine the blade, then back at her before she noticed. "You didn't..."

"Well, I think I did. I mean, his blood is dripping off of it in rivers." She giggled, lifting the blade up
higher, my brother's blood winking in the slowly brightening light.

I wanted to heave.

"Hope there's room for you to bury him next to Ben and Lisa." She laughed, and I was unable to stop the single, sole tear falling down my face.

"You will burn for this." I swore bitterly, feeling leaden against the earth.

She merely smiled viciously down at me.

"No, I have much better plans for you."

"WATCH OUT DEAN!"

Both Nira and I were caught completely off guard as Rayne suddenly made her presence known, and time seemed to slow down just enough for me to see two things that I was powerless to stop.

One, I saw that Rayne had picked up the hex bag, yanking down the neck of the hoodie the vessel wore to drop the hex bag inside it.

Two, I saw Nira react just in time to drive the blade into Rayne's chest.

"RAYNE!" I screamed, horrified and panicking at the sight.

She slumped to the ground.

And just like that, she was dead.

Blood came rushing from the three inch long stab wound, her eyes glassy and staring up at nothing, and all I could do was feel my breaths come in choked wheezes.

Oh god, oh god, Rayne and Sam, Rayne and Sam, Rayne and Sam!!!

I couldn't breathe.

Nira was struggling to get the hex bag out of the sweatshirt.

"No you don't." I snarled, scrambling to my feet to tackle the vessel to the ground, Nira huffing at the impact. I used my body to pin her to the ground, slamming the vessel's arms down to keep her from removing the hex bag.

"You feel that?!" My words meant to come out as a scream, but they only came out broken and jarred.

She didn't answer, merely fighting against me and writhing like she was on fire. I noticed the hex bag beneath the hoodie was beginning to glow blue.

"DO YOU FEEL THAT?!" I adjusted to move my hand to shove the hex bag deeper into the vessel's skin, causing Nira to scream.

"Feel that," I found myself just talking, snarling like an animal, my mind and body no longer under my own function. I was solely driven by my grief and hatred. "Feel that, you bitch. Feel everything you've caused me."

The blue glow grew brighter beneath the hoodie, brighter and brighter, and louder and louder Nira's
screams became. The light became too bright for my eyes to bear, forcing me to shut them. I held on though, shoving the hex bag against the vessel, shoving, shoving, shoving, ridding it all. My rage and hatred was my anchor, keeping me rooted with the tenacity of great mountains despite the heat that was beginning to emanate from the hex bag, quickly growing so hot my body began to protest the burns I was receiving. I would be damned if I let go of this chance now. This was ending now. She would never take anything or anyone else from me again!

I wasn't expecting the shockwave that exploded from the hex bag when the spell reached its peak.

The force of it blew me backwards, skidding me across the dirt a couple feet, and my body ached everywhere from the blast. It almost felt as if every inch of me had just been brutally bruised on top of being severely sunburned.

Silence permeated the air.

_Had it worked?_

I moaned, curling in on myself from the pain. I wanted to lie there forever and ever. I felt crushed from the impending grief I knew I would have to face.

_But was Cas back?_

I knew I had to face it. I had to know if he was alive or not.

Gathering myself together, I mustered what strength I had left, weakly hauling myself to my feet. My body felt fried, barely cooperating with me as I shuffled over closer to the limp body of Cas' vessel.

I dropped to my knees, ice beginning to flood through me as he still didn't stir, eyes closed.

"Cas..?" I whispered, scared to say his name aloud, scared to touch him, but I reached out, pulling his head into my lap. "Can you hear me?"

No response, and then his eyes opened.

A snarl rose from his lips, and next thing I knew, I was being yanked by the collar of my shirt headfirst into the dirt.

"I will tear you to shreds for this!!" Nira spat, shoving my weak body aside with surprising strength, and my heart spun as hard as my head was.

_The hex bag didn't work..._

"I let Castiel live for this!!" She roared, staggering to her feet, and I saw that while the spell hadn't worked, it did weaken her. Not enough to keep from starting to kick me where I lay on the ground though...

I coughed, spitting blood, gasping in surprise when she yanked me to my feet like a rag doll, holding me to face her livid glare levelly.

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"I'm going to enjoy every minute of this," she promised, blue eyes stormy with bloodlust and hatred. "I'm going to tear your skin off like I did Ben and Lisa. I will make you feel every little bit of it, but first," she smirked, looking back at the limp, bloodied body of my murdered friend. "I think it's time I make use of my new toys," she looked back at me with a gaze so malicious, I stopped breathing. "And you're going to watch."
She dropped me gracelessly, striding away from me as I crumpled to the ground in agony, and defeat.

*It's over...* I found myself thinking to myself incredulously. *We lost...*

*No... No we didn't...*

Abruptly, like an epiphany from heaven above, I suddenly remembered a phrase I saw in a bible I had found in a motel nightstand once of all things. Dad had gone to get dinner that night, and Sam was taking a shower, leaving me with a rare window of alone time. To this day, I still didn't know what compelled me to open that bible, but the words I saw on the page I flipped to were still engrained within me to this day.

"-always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."

_Love never fails..._

"No," I said, wincing as I fought to get my feet under me.

Nira stopped walking towards Rayne, turning to look at me.

"What did you say?"

"No." I repeated simply, ignoring every ounce of pain in my body as I stood to my full height.

"What do you mean, 'no'?' The expression the vessel wore reminded me of a petulant, spoiled brat of a teenage girl.

I wondered why I had feared her for so long.

"I'm done," I said, bravely stepping forward on shaky legs towards her, Nira eyeing me out of the vessel with wary confusion. "This game of yours? It's over."

She was silent for a moment, then she started laughing mockingly, clearly finding me a fool.

"Over?" She snorted like a pig. "Oh darling, it is far from over."

I stared at her a moment, suddenly seeing her completely differently.

I finally saw her for who she was.

I finally understood how Castiel saw the world.

I understood the lesson.

"Stop," I said, all my hate draining from me, all my rage, all my spite, all of it. "Taking from me won't fill that hole in your heart."
And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these, is love.

Years of this vicious cycle. Endless hate met with hate. So much taking, so much revenge, and so much violence, and yet, none of that wounded her as much as my words.

I saw it in the blue eyes of the vessel, how they ripped her asunder. It shattered her entire world.

"How dare you," she hissed, my words only ultimately making her angrier, but still, I was not afraid, "presume to know what I feel."

She struck me, sending me stumbling backwards, blood dribbling down my chin from my split lip.

Still, I did not fight back.

"Let it go," I begged her, suddenly overcome with the desire to end this all differently. *No one else had to die*... "Beat me, kick me, break me down, do whatever you want, but nothing is going to bring him back."

That stopped her in her tracks, but the pause was only a break from the abuse. She shoved me back, full of rage.

"What did you just say?!" She demanded, the vessel shaking from her rage.

"You heard me," I held my hands up in surrender. "Look, I'm sorry for everything that's happened, okay? I didn't know, and I bet you don't know why or how it really even happened. It's past though, Deyanira. Bury it."

"Shut up."

She snapped her fingers.

My leg snapped the same moment.

I swore in agony, crumbling to the ground awkwardly with no warning, Nira panting above me.

"No," she said shakily, pointing the blade at me, and it trembled in her furious grasp. "No, I have come too far for this."

She turned towards the East, where Rayne's limp body still lay, frozen in time forever.

I tried to sit up, panting heavily from the heady pain as I watched Nira step towards my dead friend's body.

"What are you doing?" I rasped, pulling myself up to lean against a tree.

Nira withdrew the Pandora stone from her pocket, balancing that in her right hand, and the blade in her left hand. She smiled at these items, then looked down at Rayne's body.

"What I've been planning all along," she answered, lifting the stone up to examine it closer, its blue glow illuminating the vessels eyes tenfold. "You see, it's rather fortunate your friend came along. If
she hadn't, I would've had to use your heart instead."

My stomach dropped twenty thousand leagues under a sea seemingly as I watched her drop to her knees, seriously preparing to cut my dead friend's heart out.

"Don't you dare touch her." I hissed, scrambling furiously to get to my feet despite my broken leg. I bit my lip to keep from voicing the pain that threatened to cripple me.

It was enough to stop Nira for the moment, a wickedly amused smile rising on the body of my boyfriend.

"Aw, how cute," she said mockingly, watching me fight to take a step forward, breaking a nearby tree branch to use as a cane. "You really think you can stop me."

"Leave her be," I growled, hissing as I found myself unable to take a step forward. "I won't let you defile her body that way."

Nira laughed incredulously, sobering when she realized I was serious.

"But she's already dead," she said bluntly, as if the fact of it wasn't cutting enough.

"Then use my heart," I said coolly, not once breaking my gaze from hers. "Besides, you've never cared about shedding excess blood, have you?"

She stared dubiously at me, jumping to the vessel's feet as pounding footsteps rushed up behind us. Nira's bloodthirsty smile rose on the vessel's lips.

I turned to see Claire and Jazz standing there, guns and angel blades drawn.

"This day just gets better and better." She smiled, and I instantly knew the moment I saw it that things had just gotten much, much, much worse.

"Guys! Get out of-" My warning was cut off by Nira. She clenched her left hand, causing me to suddenly be frozen in place, as well as Claire and Jazz, stopping them both in their tracks.

Oh god no...

"Dean!" Claire yelled, clearly trying to fight against the invisible force holding her down.

"Why don't you all sit a spell?" Nira cooed out of my boyfriend's vessel, throwing her hand in a downwards motion, sending both Jazz and Claire to the ground on their knees with a sickening smack. "I'll be right back."

A wink, and she was gone.

Claire suddenly screamed, and Jazz gasped in horror, looking at the horrific scene beyond me.

"Oh god..." Jazz managed to choke out, the color draining from her face as she saw Rayne's lifeless body. "Is she-?"

I couldn't speak, only feel the grief seemingly grounding me to the earth.

I couldn't bring myself to look at them when I heard Jazz burst into tears over the loss of her friend, Claire's shaky voice just barely discernible above her sobs.

"Dean...What's... What's going on..?"
"It's all my fault, and I'm sorry," I said in a rush, forcing myself to look into her eyes. Seeing the tears that threatened to leave her eyes crushed me. I forced myself to go on. "Claire, you were right about Cas. Nira has been possessing his body since she brought him back from The Empty."

"What?!" Claire exclaimed, betrayal in her voice, and the blow was visible on her face. "You lied to me?!

"I wanted to keep you safe!" I yelled, desperate for her to understand in that moment just how much I loved her. "Do you understand that?! I just want you safe!"

Some sort of understanding washed over her face when she looked at me, and I was relieved to see that maybe while that hadn't fixed everything, she saw that I meant it. Just in time too, as Nira had returned, a large brass bowl with sigils I had never seen before etched on its side. The bowl also appeared to be full of something, and she cradled it in her hands.

"Good, you're all still here," she smiled sardonically at us all, then up at the sky, where the sky had become a pale nothing color, that color it would turn just before the sun would peak over the horizon. "Just in time for the best part."

She turned her back to us, staring down at Rayne at her feet.

I felt sick.

She sank to her knees, setting the bowl out in front of her. I couldn't fully make out what she had taken out of the bowl, but it looked to be herbs or spices of some sort, but things escalated within a second once she pulled fragments of human bones out along with it. She began chanting, and I grew even colder.

What was she about to unleash?

I fought against the invisible force against me, and I could see Claire and Jazz - who had composed herself - doing the same out of my peripheral vision. It couldn't happen. We couldn't let it.

Nira tossed some of the herbs/spices into the bowl, raising the glowing Pandora stone to the sky, still chanting.

I was scrambling through my mind for any solution, anything to stop her, but I was a forced witness. The three of us were helpless to watching Nira utter a guttural word loud into the silence of nature before suddenly striking the Pandora Stone with the blade stained with the combined blood of my brother and beloved friend. A blue glow began to emanate from the bowl as Nira let the blue liquid inside the stone drip into it. It's luminous glow made it appear as if it came out of Avatar, and I was mesmerized by its beauty.

I felt entranced watching its glow, its warmth growing brighter and brighter. A blue mist began to rise from the bowl, swirling and gracefully curling its way up into the sky, forming a light blue circle.

I snapped out of the lulling peace the energy the stone brought when I realized she was making a portal of some sort.

Son of a bitch...

Then she picked up the blade, murmuring as she positioned the blade over Rayne's heart.

That's when all sense left me.
"Don't let her do it Castiel!" The desperate words tumbled from my lips before I could stop them, but I was so shaken up from the chaotic culmination of events, that I didn't even care. "I know you're in there, fight back damn it!!"

The vessel's head whirled around to glare at me, Nira still clearly in control.

"Don't give into her Cas!" Claire chimed in, Nira looking at her sharply.

"Come back to us, Castiel." Jazz encouraged bravely alongside Claire, weathering the rage in Nira's gaze.

"Enough." Nira hissed, clenching her fist in the air, and they both suddenly slumped to the ground.

Neither of them were breathing.

Oh god...

"Castiel," I tried, forcing myself to look back at Nira, ignoring my shaky voice, and shattered mental state. "Only you can stop this. I know you're in there."

Nira rolled her eyes at me, clenching her fist at me the same way she had for Jazz and Claire.

Nothing happened.

"Cas," I didn't waste the opportunity to speak. "Dammit, you son of a bitch, I need you!"

"Shut. Up."

"Castiel," I rambled on, Nira snapping her fingers, looking utterly bewildered when nothing happened. "Come on, I know you can do this! Fight for us! Fight for me dammit!" I didn't even care when Nira rose from the ground in a fury, stalking over to me. "JUST WAKE UP PLEASE!"

"I said, shut. Up." Nira struck me across the face, the invisible force holding me down abruptly disappearing, and I screamed as I collapsed to the ground gracelessly. The pain from my broken leg being jostled almost made me pass out, but I clung on.

"Castiel," I choked out, covering my face with my hands, trying to avoid the abuse. "I'm here, I won't leave you..."

I could no longer feel my face, and I heard more than felt my nose break at the next blow Nira struck on me. I could taste the coppery tang of blood in the back of my throat, and I coughed, noticing the abuse had stopped. I could hear Nira panting above me, and I didn't understand why I could barely see, but I kept speaking.

"I'm here Cas," I turned my head, splitting out blood. "I'll always be here."

I don't think I had ever been beaten so much in my life.

Nira was ruthless, insensitive, and insatiable when it came to putting me in agony. I was utterly helpless to her attacks, and I quickly grew too weak to try and protect myself. Blood rushed over my skin in ticklish rivers, pouring from my nose, down the back of my throat... She beat me, kicked me, and tore at my body in ways that wasn't holy. Soon, all I could taste was copper, and all I could smell was my own blood saturating the ground around me. Spot begin to dance across my vision from the pain, and my consciousness faded in and out upon waves. In the farthest corners of my mind, where the last of my cognizance resided, I knew I was dying.
"This is so pathetic," Nira finally scoffed bitterly when still, despite all that, I clung to life.

She kicked me out of the way when she got up, and I could just barely make out her walking back over to the bowl, where everything still lay, the blue glow from the portal she had started still there. My heart dropped when she picked up the knife.

"D-don't-" I managed to protest, still refusing to see her use my friend's heart.

Nira laughed at me, twisting the bloodied blade over in her fingers as she sauntered over to me.

"Oh, don't worry honey," she cooed, ceremoniously dropping to her knees besides me. I could barely understand what was fully happening, as sounds and colors were beginning to blur together in a muddled mesh within my mind. "This is just for you."

She smiled to herself, beaming the smile of a winner who has just won everything they could've ever dreamed of.

"Oh, how long I've waited for this," she sighed, and I could just vaguely feel the blade lightly drag on top of my blood saturated shirt. She played with teasing me for a moment, an utterly blissful look on her face as she said, "any final words, Winchester?"

I stared straight up at the sky, taking in the pastel pinks, blues, and oranges. The sun had just peaked over the horizon, and I took it all in, one last time. I suddenly remembered the morning after Castiel and I had first slept together, how terrified I was then. How beautiful the sky had looked, and how warm Cas had been against me. How he listened to me, told me for the first time in his own words, that he had always loved me.

How warm his kiss was...

"I may not be a smart man," I choked out, ignoring the shattering pain in my lungs that fought against me from uttering the words. "But I know what love is."

Nira scoffed.

"Typical. Too bad no one will hear how much of a fangirl you are." She then smiled at me, making sure I held her gaze. "I'll go down in history for this."

Then the blade began sinking into my skin.

Sam...

Rayne...

Jazz...

Claire...

Castiel....

I tried...

I'm sorry...

I couldn't help it.

I screamed.
Nira began laughing at my pain, growing high off of my misery. Words cannot describe the level of agony I felt, and I doubt any normal person would've lasted this long. My entire world was pain, and death was something I longed for. Every cell of my being begged for it to end, for the climax of death to come. It was too much, too much, too much, so much, that I didn't even realize the dragging of the blade had stopped. So caught up in the agony, I didn't realize my attacker had given me mercy.

Or that I was alive.

"No..." I could just barely hear a voice say my name, and it was like a whisper in a dream, a benediction in the night.

"Dean."

My eyes fluttered open on their own accord, in tune with the voice before my mind was.

Castiel.

"No!!" I heard Nira scream, and though I had no function over my body, I could see that the vessel had gotten to its feet, stamping about like a two year old having a tantrum. "No!!" Nira's voice screamed again, and the vessel suddenly went still, though the entire body was quivering and shaking like a possessed person undergoing an exorcism.

Then the body stilled completely, the stubbled face suddenly growing incredibly stoic. Hard lines spread across its face with the determination of an army general, and the blue eyes looked straight ahead, fearless and unnerved to anything. Suddenly, the pain within me was erased in a fraction of a second as I recognized the body language that had forever been burned into my memories.

Castiel spoke.

"Get. Out."

I watched in horror as Castiel suddenly went up in brilliant flames, his body slowly levitating up off of the ground up to a good ten, fifteen feet, and yet, despite my terror and bewilderment, it was the most ethereal thing I had ever witnessed.

I saw him.

Or... Maybe it was just a mirage... A mere glimpse of him through the brilliantly and intricately constructed veils that separated our planes of existence.

Maybe I'd never see all of Castiel, and to some, that would make me a piss poor partner to not know. To others, they'd think I'd lack refinement, or just be in it for the 'holy get up' factor.

Or, maybe to a rare thinking, genuine few, they'd see it for what it was.

I never needed to see Castiel's true form to validate who he was, or to sate some animalistic desire. I hadn't needed this, because I had come to see exactly who he was just in my reality. His character, his choices and decisions - wins or losses - had painted it all for me.

I'd never admit it, but there had always been a part of me that had quivered in his presence, because boyfriend or not, his... Otherworldliness, translated somewhere in every single encounter I'd had with him. It usually was the simplest thing too, something that would just abruptly remind me of his power, such as when I almost spilled a beer in the bunker once.

It had been hot that night, and it didn't help that the AC decided to take a ride in a hearse that same morning.
So I had been in a tank top and shorts, while Cas ended up wearing my t-shirt and jeans I talked him into wearing. (I mean, it couldn't have been nice sitting around in all those damn layers right?) In the midst of that night, I had been doing research on a new AC unit, writing down names of some while Sam tried in vain to fix our current one at the time. I at one point, of course forgot about the pencil, and placed my beer right on top of it, which made its guaranteed fall the second I let go. But the second I realized what was happening, Cas had already slid the pencil away and righted my beer bottle milliseconds from a drop even spilling. He carefully set my beer upright, gazing at it for a moment to assure its status before handing me my pencil - mind you, his face completely deadpan as he said: "Your pencil, Dean. You should be more mindful where you leave it."

Needless to say, it was pretty damn hot that night.

But little moments of his super reflexes, healing, knowledge, or battle prowess always painted a pretty good image to me as to how he would probably look like.

In my mind, he was beautiful; bright and colorful. Maybe frayed on the edges of his essence or form, but still bright and vibrant at the core. Essentially, I had pictured Cas' true form as warmth, peace, and love personified.

And even in this horrific state of seeing him do a sort of explode/implode before me, he was breath taking.

Gold, bright, fiery gold, almost the color of a lion's mane in the light of the sunset. It literally looked as if over the body of Jimmy, Cas' true form was protruding a foot away in a fiery gold, flaming silhouette. Surprisingly, it was in the general form of a human, but mainly from the neck down; the makeup was different. Instead of having just arms, thick but short and sturdy feathers grew off of his four arms, almost like an Indian headdress but made for arms. His head was very much like that of a phoenix bird, all gorgeous flames and fire. The mirage of sorts was much too bright for me to make out major details or even if there was other colors beyond what I was seeing, but I was able to make out how angular his face was. It was almost like the helmets the Tron characters wore while riding their motorcycle or whatever. The front of his face came to a point, though I couldn't see much more since his head was thrown back, almost swallowed by the plethora of feathers coming off of the huge pair of wings on his back in addition to the ones on his arms. It was like feathers made of golden flames, the sight and colors alone beyond the measure of words. A perfect blend of Phoenix, and human.

Despite how incredible that all sounded, it was only a poor idea of his true grandeur.

Those who have met their celebrity favorite of sorts in person for the very first time, having previously only known their digital personality, can understand what I mean when I say that photos and videos do no justice.

Those that have tried to photograph a cliffside to capture it's dizzying aura, know what I mean when I say the pictures only scratch the surface of that magnitude.

Those that have tried an amazing food, know words cannot fully convey how incredible it really tasted.

Those who have ever been in love, know it is a deep, unfathomable depth of emotions that can never be verbalized.

Castiel's true form was beyond words. Beyond comparison of everything I'd ever seen in all my
hunting life, and I had seen some beautiful things in that time, but none quite like this.

For a fraction of a second, I became a child again in his brilliant light, instantly swept away in the beauty, purity, and love of it. In that fraction of a second, I felt what it was like to feel him in body, soul, and mind. It was the same warm, loving energy I felt every time he healed me, every time he looked at me, and every time he touched me, but times infinity.

The world became infinite, and my world became that bright and beaming yellow. *But what was that sound..?*

A sizzle had begun to permeate the loud screaming and roar of the fiery heat of Castiel's form, growing louder and louder with increasing intensity. I couldn't place the sound, couldn't place what was even happening. The sizzling sound took on a crackle, and I suddenly thought, *something is burning.*

Then, I smelled it.

Death, the pungent, repulsive smell of it.

*Oh god... one of them is being burned alive...*

*But who..?*

The fiery light burning out from Cas' vessel grew even blinding, forcing me to shut my eyes and wince at the ear shattering screams that turned into a wailing frequency, one that caused a dead tree across the clearing from us to snap in half easily.

It grew brighter and brighter, warmer and warmer, louder and louder. I wondered if this was what it would be like to be in the path of a nuclear bomb.

Then, just as if someone turned off the light, the burning sun-like glow behind my eyelids was gone.

Silence.

A thump, like a body hitting the ground.

I cracked open my eyes, just barely able to make out the body of my boyfriend lying five feet away from me, weak, blue eyes staring into mine from inside a body that was visibly smoldering from the heat and burned, but intact.

"Dean..." The voice of Nira spoke, weak and tired eyes still locked on mine, head wobbling with the forced effort to keep it upright.

I was unprepared for what happened next.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, and tears began to flow from the eyes of the abused vessel. "I-I just w-wanted... what you gave him.... what you both had..."

She went limp, eyes going glassy as she slumped to the ground a final time.

I felt my heart shatter.

"C-Cas?" I wheezed out, my heart starting to feel like a choking weight was pressed into it. I could feel its beats growing farther and farther apart.

Silence.
"Cas..." I whispered, feeling the tears roll off my cheeks despite it all.

No response.

No sign of life.
I let myself go.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, sorry to leave you guys off with such a heavy ending... I hope you all enjoyed, and of course, thank you guys so much for the comments and votes you leave! I love getting feedback from you guys, and I always appreciate the time you take to leave wonderful things, so thanks. :)

Also, the next chapter I post is most likely going to be the final one. (Wow, after all this time an ending?) I'm going to warn you all now by saying, expect this chapter to take a while in the making. I'm going to take my time on this one, because I want to enjoy writing one last chapter for this series before I lay it to rest, and because, well, I haven't quite figured out how to end it just yet, haha. I've put a lot of time, and a lot of effort into this series, almost abandoning it once already. It's been a hard and long time coming, and this series truly deserves a good and proper ending. So bear with me as this chapter slowly falls into place, and I promise you won't be disappointed once it does get added!

Thank you guys for reading, and until the next chapter!

- Dest
"Dean!"

I looked up from washing the dishes, smiling to see Rayne running up to me, hands behind her back. A mischievous smile lit up her face, and she had the energy of a boisterous child.

"Whose cereal did you pee in?" I teased, curious of her strange behavior.

She made a disgusted face at me, and I couldn't help but laugh.

"Why would you even say something like that?" She rolled her eyes, shaking her head as I rinsed my hands then dried them off with a towel. "You're weird."

"Sorry to break your bubble, Shirley Temple," I chuckled, grinning when she dramatically flipped her long purple curly hair over her shoulder. "But, I think you're a little late to that party."

She smiled, ducking when I playfully launched the damp towel at her, which she easily dodged.

"Hey!" She laughed, shaking her head once more before shoving a large, rectangular object at me, the entirety of it wrapped in white wrapping paper that was covered in these goofy looking cartoony adult characters doing various humorous poses. "Happy birthday big guy."

"This is for me?" I asked in surprise, carefully taking the gift she presented.

"Duh," she rolled her eyes. "Don't make me have to go to extreme lengths to get you to notice."

I scowled at her, causing her to laugh. Ever since I'd told her about me and Cas' story of meeting, our years of friendship before finally, finally, coming together, she never let me live down the fact that - in her words - I in fact, "was a blind dumbass."

"Shut up," I said out of playful reflex, grinning at her as I gestured to her gift. "Open it?"

"Heck yeah," she beamed, a sort of electricity thrumming through her. "But... before you do, just
know I did it because I thought it was necessary. And... I'm sure you'll thank me later..."

I furrowed a brow at her, now wary of opening the book-like package.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just open it," she gestured to the gift, then almost bashfully put her fist to her lips, as if restraining herself from opening it for me.

I wasted no more time, tearing at the packaging, ripping the amusing paper away, it slowly fluttering to the floor around me like confetti. Once all the paper was gone, left in my hands was a leather bound scrapbook, nearly two inch thick letters burned across the front of it that spelled out: *The Winchester Family: it don't end in blood.*

"I noticed you and Sam didn't have a scrapbook of any of your family pictures," she explained as I pulled back the cover of the scrapbook, my heart clenching in my chest at the first page. "Sam helped me put it all together, and we snagged some pictures from your room if you ever wondered where some went."

"Yeah," I chuckled weakly, blinking rapidly as I stared at the smiling faces of my parents, the front page decorated in an aesthetic wedding theme, (obviously Rayne's touch.) There was a picture of my parents at the altar, and of them cutting the wedding cake, faces split into wide grins. Even my mom's actual engagement ring was taped to the page, and it made my heart ache bittersweetly. "I wondered."

I flipped to the next page, smiling to see a picture of my dad in front of the impala when he was young, thumps up and grinning. I recognized it to be the picture my mom took of him the day he first bought the Impala. This page was a fall theme, and below the picture of my dad and the Impala, was a black and white photo of my mom when she looked to be in her early twenties. She was resting her chin on her palm while sitting on a stone water fountain, staring out into space with a small smile on her face. *She looked so young...*

Below that, was a picture of my parents together, my dad's arm wrapped around my mom as they stood in front of our house back in Lawrence. My mom was pregnant with me in the photo at this time.

The next page was a typical cozy family theme, but it didn't bother me one bit. The page was beautifully arranged with pictures of me, Sammy, and our mom, made complete with the picture I had kept next to my bed on my nightstand of the three of us together. The very one that had somehow gone missing somewhere during the time of last month, nowhere to be found even when I'd searched high and low for it. There was even one picture with Sam, dad and I in front of the impala, a photo we'd taken back before Sammy had left for college... I had forgotten we'd taken that photo...

"Rayne..." I said softly, hardly able to get the words out from the choked up emotions I felt inside, my throat growing tighter as I flipped to the next page, a single, bold word in a 3D sticker across the middle of the page.

**BROTHERS**

Littered over it were pictures of me and Sam together, laughing and grinning, stupid, and crazy. The theme even extended to the next page with more updated photos of Sam and I, the most recent being the time we played chess in the bunker library.
"Keep looking through it," she urged me, gently grabbing my arm to guide me to the kitchen table, where I gratefully sat next to her, placing the scrapbook on the table.

I knew I would definitely have to look through it again later more thoroughly, but I flipped to the next page before I got stuck looking at everything on the previous page for the next twenty minutes, knowing there was more Rayne wanted me to see.

My breath caught in my throat with what I saw next.

This page was purple, and full of a nerdy aesthetic.

Charlie's smiling face stared up at me from the page.

I looked at Rayne, suddenly unsure if I wanted to keep looking further.

"I know," she said softly, her eyes not on me, but on the ghostly image of my dead best friend. "It was hard for Sam too."

I nodded, taking a deep breath as I looked back down at Charlie's smiling face, wondering how long it'd been since I'd last seen it.

_If Sam could get through this and help MAKE it, then I can too..._

Charlie's page extended to the next one, pictures with her and Sam, her and I, all of us with Castiel, and playing at the arcade for her birthday that one time... It was all there, laid out beautifully on theme appropriate pages, memories sealed and protected behind plastic layers. I smiled through the pain, old, happy memories flooding to the surface with each picture.

I flipped to next page.

Kevin and Mrs. Tran was on it, then Claire after that, each with their own theme befitting them. And on and on it went. The scrapbook was so beautifully put together, I could barely keep the tears from flowing from my eyes as I saw all the old faces I loved. Old painful faces too, faces like Ash, Pamela, Benny, Bobby, Jo and Ellen. Then some more recent faces, like Garth, Jody, Donna, Rayne, Alex, as well as Sam and Jazz together.

Then the most painful one.

_Castiel._

"Son of a bitch..." I said quietly, staring down at the first page.

There was a whole aesthetic dedicated to Castiel, except...

_There was no photos anywhere..._

I furrowed a brow, seeing Castiel's name neatly scripted across the top of the page, a soft blue and green aesthetic being the theme of the page.

"Uh, why isn't there any photos..?" I asked carefully, turning the page to see that the rest of the scrapbook was empty, pages upon pages of endless potential.

"It's because you have to put them there, silly." She laughed, patting the empty page.

"He's in The Empty Rayne..." I said softly, a harsh pang of guilt and loneliness flooding through me.
She said nothing, so I looked at her, confused of her silence, but I saw that me looking her in the eye had been what she was waiting for. Her gray-blue eyes were serious, as if she was conveying me important information that was do or die. I sobered, somehow knowing I would remember this moment for a long time to come.

"It's for when you get him back, Dean," she took my hand, taking it and placing it over his name in the scrapbook. I could still feel her eyes on me even though I was looking down at our hands, the texture of the letters that spelled his name seemingly like fire beneath my palm. "For when you two can create memories together once again. I made this for you, so that way everyone you've ever loved is always with you, and there's plenty of room for whoever gets added to the family later. And," she patted the scrapbook. "I may have put a tiny spell on it that makes it indestructible and have endless pages."

I burst out laughing.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously!" She beamed, left dimple in her cheek appearing. "Anything you put in it will be protected. So maybe," she poked me playfully. "You can even put those pictures of you and Cas in there right now. I even made a spot for it." She pointed to the little section on the page that was indeed perfectly made to fit the photo booth pictures he and I took. "Right there."

I smiled at the spot, my right hand slipping into my pocket to finger to aging pictures.

"You did, didn't you."

"Come on, let's see if it fits!" She said excitedly. "I know you've got them, you always do."

"Oh you know me so well," I rolled my eyes, pulling the pictures out, my heart aching bittersweetly at the sight of them.

I placed the row of photos in the spot she had made, and it fitted damn near perfectly, a golden glow forming around the picture as the magic sealed it in place.

"Thanks Rayne," I said softly, smiling down at the pictures, fresh determination rising within me to find him.

"You're welcome," she said, giving me a hug, then looking back down at the photos. "You better fill it up."

I smiled.

"I will."

» Now «
"Sir..."

"Sir-

I could vaguely feel a sort of shock rippling through me.
A first, then another.
The fifth one yanked me back to reality.
I gasped for air, surfacing from underwater.
"Sir, are you with me?" A professional female voice spoke to me, and I groggily realized she was waving a flashlight across my eyes. "There's been severe trauma-

I could feel myself fading again.

It just felt so warm... I wanted to sleep forever and ever...

"Sir!" I was pulled back from the numbing warmth, my eyes opening in response to bright light. Please shut up... "Stay with me!"

Pain. Son of a bitch, it was everywhere... Up and down my body, in my head, in my soul, and in my heart. I felt extremely beaten somewhere deep within me, and I was scared to acknowledge it.

I knew once I acknowledged it, recovery would be a long, long road. I could feel the vast gash of the pain in every part of me. I couldn't consciously remember anything, couldn't consciously think anything. I was swimming in agony, drowning drowning drowning so deep within it.

I didn't want this anymore.

Let me go.

Let me die...
Numbness.

That was the first thing I noticed when I came to.

It happened very slowly, as slowly as those dinosaur computers Sam and I had to use when we were kids. I still remembered how fucking long they'd taken to boot up, to open up the programs, and run in general. Slow as fucking shit compared to the newfangled technology they had now that I barely understood at times.

I remembered one afternoon I'd spent at a library, researching for dad on the down low while Sam worked on some schoolwork he'd had at the time, back before he'd figured out monsters were real. It had been raining that day, and the rain pelting against the roof sounded like little animal feet running across the roof as I'd stared at the computer screen, waiting for it to boot up. Still to this day for some reason, I remembered how long it felt waiting for it all to come online, the computer lazily dragging through the typical company and program booting sequences, the sound of the rain somehow making time feel slower.

Coming to now, felt very much like watching that computer work itself up back to life then.

It was all gradual, and feeling returned to me first.

It started with me vaguely recalling the weight of my own body, the weight of my arms and legs, and how my body was currently supine across something, probably a bed. Remembering the feeling of my body, of my limbs, of breathing, and of swallowing my own saliva, was an almost juvenile rebirth. It was like the time when dad had first taught me how to drive the Impala and having that initial cross of fear and excitement when for the first time, I sat in the drivers seat of that great machine, knowing how it functioned, but not yet how to use it.

I had to remember it all over again in the same fashion.

Next, came summoning the strength to wake up.

It started with me coming back to the reality outside of the warm and safe hideouts of my mind, and sounds began to return to me. I began to register simple sounds at first, like wheels spinning on a cart somewhere, a chair squeaking as it was pulled across the floor, and a beeping sound, similar to that of a heart rate monitor. The low volume of a news broadcast on a nearby tv somewhere, droned on over the hum of indistinct conversations going on around me, none of these voices familiar though. Still too weak to get my eyes to open, I started taking in smells as well, and that's then I finally noticed how the sterile smells of the air burned my nose slightly. Instantly at that, I knew that I was in a hospital, and that's when the memories came flooding back. The smell of burnt flesh...

Oh god Castiel...

Rayne and Sam...

Claire and Jazz...

I survived and they didn't...

I'm the only one left...
The crushing reality of this, shattered me, broke me so far and so deep inside, that I knew I did not want to suck in another breath of air ever again. Living was no longer a desire for me.

"Leave me alone!" I wanted to scream to the stupid doctors that had me rigged up to a machine that was the only thing keeping me alive. "Just let me die in peace!"

As close as I'd obviously come to death, it bothered me to realize that I hadn't encountered a single reaper at all yet. I was even insane enough to pray for one. I longed for one so deeply and passionately inside, that it was almost painful, but not as painful as knowing that the ones that I'd loved dearly with all my heart and soul, were gone. Now, and forever.

The only people that I'd ever had the courage to truly love, had been taken from me, and in that, I came to terms with the most painful thing in human existence. It wasn't until I loved something more than myself, did I realize that I never had anything at all to begin with. Before them, Sam, Claire, Jazz, Rayne and Castiel, I had been asleep to the things that mattered the most. Even if I had to lose every material possession I owned to keep my family safe or bring them back, even Baby, it would be worth it. Because to loose them, was to loose it all.

And I'd lost everything.

*If I can't have the things that I want, then give me the things that I need...*

*Give me what I need to be numb forever...*

Suddenly I felt a calm, a sort of sudden peace wash over me, gently pulling me towards the numbing, comforting darkness inside me.

I gave into it.

"Dean?"

I blinked, squinting my eyes in an effort to clear the blurriness from them, a hazy form of a woman standing before me. The details were still too marred from my spotty vision to even make out what the contours of her face looked like, but she had tan skin, and long dark brown hair. Sunlight set the greenery of wherever we were outside, ablaze in greenish light, and I realized I was lying on the ground somewhere.
"Where am I?" I demanded, struggling backwards away from the bending form, my vision way too spotty for my liking. Where the hell was my gun? "Get away from me!"

"Dean," she said again, and suddenly it clicked in my mind instantly who it was as I heard her voice more clearly, but I instantly denied myself my suspicions. No...no, it's not her...It's impossible... "It's me, relax."

I blinked again, my vision gradually clearing. Enough now for me to make out who it was, and I was shocked to see that my hearing had been spot on.

"Rayne?!" I stammered, shaking my head in disbelief. "B-but...you're dead! And...what the hell happened to your hair? It's brown now."

She laughed at me, tossing her long, chocolate brown curly hair over her shoulder, her eyes twinkling in amusement as she stepped forward to give me a hand.

"Thanks for the compliment," she teased, hauling me up off of the ground with surprising strength for her tiny frame, the top of her head just barely even reaching my shoulder when I stood at my full height. "But, I know what I'm doing here...so the bigger question is, what are you doing here, Winchester?"

"I don't even know where here even is." I sighed irascibly as I brushed off pine needles and dirt from the back of my red plaid shirt and jeans.

She gave me a look as reply, her brutally honest gaze enough to level cities. And I knew.

"So it's true..." I whispered, hating hearing every bit of the words that tasted like poison on my tongue.

She shrugged. "It's up to you."

I furrowed a brow. "What do you mean?"

"Dean, did you get escorted here?" She looked around, gesturing to the gorgeous redwood and sequoia trees that surrounded us. "Because I did. I knew I the minute I decided to save you, because I saw mine."

"No," I said automatically, not wanting to hear another word of this. This can't be reality!

"No, this is a dream, and you're just in my head right now. None of what you're telling me is real."

"Then if this is just a dream," she retorted, but her voice so calm and deadly steady, it sent chills down my spine. "Then why don't I look like how you remember me to look? Why am I here with you? Why isn't it with Castiel?" She chuckled with a wink, and I grudgingly gave her a nod that said, I see your point... She sobered though, eyes growing hard as she continued. "Don't lie to yourself, Dean, you know the truth. You may tell yourself you don't, but deep inside, you do. You've always known, but that's your problem," she stepped closer, her eyes blazing with the vehemence of her words that she wanted me to understand, "you lie to yourself saying you don't. You run and hide from it all, because that's easier than facing up to the reality. It's easier than embracing the things that you love, because the things you love, also have the ability to break you."

"I do embrace the things I love!" I protested, growing angry with her accusations and bewildered as to where this was coming from. "What the hell is this all about, Rayne?"

"Stop it Dean!" She pleaded, instead, growing emotional rather than angry with me like I'd been prepared for, stepping closer to me. "Don't you get it? You're here because you're not willing to take
what you want, because you're scared...And Dean...It's okay."

"Quit speaking in goddamn cryptics!" I yelled, at the end of my rope officially. "This is a dream, and I'm going to wake up any minute."

"No, Dean," I was surprised when she reached up, cupping my face gently in her hands, forcing me to look her in the eye, her gaze near bordering hysteria, as if she was trying to tell me something vital before time ran out. "It's up to you to get out."

"What do you mean..?" I asked carefully, her strange aura causing me to wonder if this really wasn't a dream...

"The spell Deyanira was trying to do," she said in a rush, both of us darkening with hidden rages at the mention of her name. "She was trying to open the gates to heaven, hell, purgatory, and the empty. All at once. She wanted to unleash chaos upon the earth, and to begin the apocalypse that oldest records in multiple cultures all over the earth, foretell. A true bloodbath and free for all on cosmic and interdimensional levels that could upset the balance of the entire universe. But Dean," she suddenly smiled, her eyes wet with relief and joy. "We stopped it. Deyanira is dead, and we all saved the balance of the universe. But," the joy in her eyes turned serious, her eyes no longer wavering from mine, and I instinctually knew that whatever she was about to say next, was important. "In her spell being upset though, it reversed the doorways to all those places eternally."

"So..." I said slowly, not sure if I should celebrate or not. "What does that mean?"

"It means," her eyes dropped from mine, eyes focused on the ground. "That once you cross the threshold of any door to those worlds now, that choice is permanent. Now, and forever. There is no going back, for her magic was so powerful, the energy could not be dispelled, therefore it had to go somewhere. Since her initial will of the spell was not completed, the energy of it became neutral, but fixed. A one way doorway."

I took it all in for a moment, initially in awe of what I was hearing. Until now, I'd thought that no one possessed magic that would rival Rowena's when she'd removed The Mark of Cain from my arms, and never would. Clearly, I'd been wrong, and though I was glad the bitch was dead, a part of me couldn't help but feel wryly impressed with Deyanira.

But then, it raised a bigger question.

"What does that mean for me then?" I asked, a coldness coming over me as I began to realize what she was ultimately getting at. "Are you saying I'm dead and that if I choose to tell heaven or hell to fuck off, I'll be Casper forever?"

"Not exactly," she quirked a smile for a brief second, but it was gone in a heartbeat. "I'm telling you, that whatever you choose, you will have. Now, and forever, you could have it. So be careful what you choose, because even though you may want it now, would you actually want it forever?"

Her gaze was unwavering when I stared her down, testing how serious she was. As much as I figured (or hoped really,) that she wasn't, I could see that in reality, she was dead serious. Not a word of what she was saying was a lie, and I somehow knew that no matter what this was, dream, death, or some kind of freaky ass reality, the choice I was about to make here was genuinely vital.

"Am I dead?" I asked the scary question aloud, only growing more confused when she smiled ambiguously, like she was hiding the greatest surprise ever. "What about Sam, Castiel and everyone else? What about you? Are you actually dead?"
"Regarding me, Sam, Castiel, Jazz, or Claire," she shrugged helplessly, but I had a feeling she didn't feel sorry at all about that. "Those answers are both their stories, and my own. It's not for me to tell you their stories, and we are not talking about my story now, we are talking about yours. So, tell me Dean," I looked up, meeting her gaze with my own once again, her gaze so steady and serious, I knew it was now, or never. "When you picture happiness, when you allow yourself to feel the beautiful things that you truly love in your heart, what is it you feel? What are the things you want most when you're not complicating your mind with trivial thoughts and worries, such as wondering if loving this thing is right or wrong, or if person A or B will approve of what sets your heart on fire?" She leaned closer to me, willing me to understand this. "Because those are the things you want forever. So, Dean, what sets your heart on fire?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but she held up a finger, stopping me.

"Don't tell me, actually," she amended, running her fingers lightly through my hair, the way a sister would comfort a brother. "Tell yourself. Close your eyes, and picture it. Visualize it, Dean. See it clearly, and follow it. Follow your heart with vision and action, and it will always lead you to where you want to be. So close your eyes," she said softly, gently covering my eyes with her hand, forcing me to close them, and I allowed the darkness of her hand to overtake my senses. "Close your eyes Dean, and go to where you are happiest. You have done so, so much," she was still running her free hand through my hair, and vaguely, I realized I had begun to weep in her embrace. "Let yourself be happy, Dean. Let yourself love. Allow yourself to have the things you know you deserve, and stop running," she was crying now too, but she carried on, so strong even when I was breaking. "Stop making yourself weary, and stop killing your spirit by carrying on with things that you don't even love and don't even love you to begin with. Stop with these delusions you let yourself live with, and let yourself be free."

In her words, and in my sobs, I traveled inside, deep into my heart.

I traveled on the message of her words, giving up my past, and surrendering to it all. I surrendered to all the pain, of all that I'd lost, and given up. I let my wounds heal in the light of what lit up the depths of my heart, and I allowed myself to feel.

*I let myself go to the place that set my heart on fire.*

I gasped, sucking in air though my lungs, hardly able to breathe fast enough.

"Dean!?!" I knew that voice instantly.
"Cas?" I could barely get the words out fast enough, still gasping for air as my vision cleared, finding myself sitting up in a hospital room, Castiel standing at my bedside in a panic. "Is that really you? What's going on, am I dead? Where are the others? How are you alive?"

I was even more bewildered to see that Castiel had begun crying, reaching out to put his hand over mine, large and so warm against my own.

"You're in the hospital, you've been in a coma for the past two weeks," he answered, obviously struggling to get ahold of himself, smiling through his tears. "And the others are fine, they are just getting something to eat," he hastily assured me as I gripped his hand like a life preserver, still trying to catch up to what was happening.

"Deyanira is dead?" I growled, bitter pain rising up inside me like bile as I feared the answers to the things I also desperately wanted to know. "What about Sam? What about the girls? Is she-" I found that I couldn't say her name aloud, Castiel hearing me out patiently.

"She is," he affirmed, answering each of my questions in order, his emotions and tears calming. "Sam is fine, and so are the girls."

I hadn't the heart to ask if he meant that for Rayne too.

"But...how? How is Sam alive? I thought she, I thought-" I stammered, wanting and not wanting to know the truth all at once.

"Rowena," Castiel said simply, wiping his eyes with his free hand offhandedly. "She decided last minute that she wanted to assist you all on releasing Deyanira from my vessel out of revenge. She came right before Deyanira showed up for the blade," he suddenly looked forlorn, and I knew things hadn't all gone well. "She was able to save Sam, but nearly at the cost of her own life."

I blinked.

"Rowena...she...did that?"

Castiel nodded gravely, eyes a stormy blue.

"But Sam is..." I said carefully, growing more hopeful when Cas' eyes brightened at the mention of his name. "Alive...? And what was on the blade was...Rowena's blood?"

"Yes," he smiled grimly at me, face a wretched mix of grief and pain alike.

"So that means..." I said slowly, hardly daring to believe what he was implying. "The other thing...?"

"Yes, Dean," he squeezed my hands tighter, eyes watery as he stared down at the sheets. "Yes."

I suddenly wanted to weep, squeezing his hands back just as tightly as I fought my throat as it constricted on me. So it was true...

"But..." I cleared my throat, speaking when I'd recovered enough. "It's really over?" I asked carefully, looking him all over to find him mostly intact, much to my relief. Other than some bruises and cuts, he seemed no worse for wear. I wondered why he hadn't healed himself yet. Maybe it was to keep up the facade, or maybe he only had enough juice to do it gradually... "Is it just you in there...?"

"Yes," he answered, and though this was the happiest bit of news I'd heard in a long time, I couldn't
understand why he appeared so blasé about it. "It's just me. Deyanira is dead."

"Awesome," I tried to grin, but it felt fake, and I didn't feel like we'd won at all. There was a nagging suspicion inside of me that felt like there was something more he wasn't telling me...and it unnerved me. Whatever it was, was big, and I knew I wouldn't like whatever it was. "Cas?"

"Yes, Dean?" he answered me patiently, resting his cheek against our intertwined hands while he gazed at me, the act so human and mundane, it felt unreal.

"What aren't you telling me?" I said warily, working to not let myself get caught up in those eyes. "Because there's something that you're not, so what is it?"

He sighed, taking a heavy breath, throat moving as he worked to swallow. Sorrow darkened his face, then pain, then just as abruptly, some sort of obvious catharsis. Licking his lip, he put our hands back down on the bed, unable to look me in the eyes as he said:

"Getting rid of Deyanira..." he began slowly, the weight of all the trauma he had endured over the past three years heavy upon him in that moment, making him appear tired, and old. "It took everything I had, Dean. Everything."

He lifted his gaze to look me in the eyes, his gaze so sullen and resigned, I suddenly knew exactly what he'd given up to save me, and everyone else. And it tore me apart.

"Cas..." I whispered softly, so wounded and guilty knowing the price he'd paid for not just me, but for everything. "You really mean..?" I couldn't even finish the words, knowing me saying them aloud would only tear at the hole that was now in Cas' changed psyche forever.

"Yes," he finished for me, and with surprising coolness, lifting my hand that he held to press it against his chest, where I could feel his steady and consistent heartbeat beneath my palm. He lifted his gaze to look at me again, eyes blazing with a passion that was almost violent as he held my hand fixed in place over his heart. "But, Dean, don't you dare blame yourself for what happened, because I know you'll try to," he held up a finger when I opened my mouth to protest, and I reluctantly let him finish, his heart beating a rhythm into my palm that was a devastatingly painful reminder of what had become. "What happened, happened. So don't blame yourself, because without the past, you'd be nothing. It is not what happened in the past that defines what comes, but how you choose to bear what happens after, that does. What happened with Deyanira," he pressed my hand harder against his chest just a fraction, refusing to let me pull it away when the reality was too painful for me to bear, forcing me to ride it out like he had been doing. "Happened. There is no going back, and there is no remedying it, Dean. We may not be who we once were," the heavy look we exchanged almost made him choke on his own words from the emotion, but he somehow still found the words to continue. "But we are here, and by whatever good fortune or fate, we prevented her from opening the multidimensional doorway. What was done to prevent that is done, and what has been lost," his eyes darkened recalling the sacrifices that had been made, "is lost...We are fortunate to be together still despite everything, and I am so grateful be with you. Saving the world, and this," he smiled at me, rubbing his thumb pointedly against the back of my hand. "Is worth everything I gave up."

I couldn't even speak, only stare at him in awe as he met my gaze with the same intensity.

"Come here," I suddenly found myself whispering, reaching up to thread my fingers into his hair.

He softened with this, knowing exactly what I was wanting. It was like the torture had all ended the minute he leaned forward enough that I could feel his breath upon my skin, smell the coffee laced on it. It was so, so slow, our lips just hovering over the others for seemingly an eternity, as if we both wanted to be sure the other was there. Who they really were inside...
It was like the first time we'd kissed, a gentle falling together that was unplanned, and uncoordinated. What started off as an act of overwhelming love, became almost hysterical, and the minute our lips came together, I found myself kissing him like the moment my lips separated from him, I would dissolve into nothingness. While Castiel shared some of my fever, he was more levelheaded than the two of us, keeping the kiss from getting too far out of hand. I'd forgotten how tender he was, how gentle his hands were when they touched me, and how warm he was.

Guess he'd be like that forever now.

The blissed out look on his face afterwards made me chuckle, and he looked as if he was on cloud nine when we pulled away. I suddenly had this feeling of knowing that there were things I hadn't said, that needed to be said. Things that tugged and tugged so hard inside of me, I could no longer deny them, and the courage to say them came on fast.

"Cas," I began, saying the words that felt like they had to be said now, or I would have to hold my peace forever. "The things that make you happy...The things that you know that you want now, and forever, am I one of those things?"

He stared at me quietly, the gears in his head turning as clearly a part of him was trying to comprehend my strange question, while another part of him, was the part that eventually caused him to smile. I knew then there was a sort of obvious answer to my question.

"Yes," he answered so confidently, I wanted to weep out of nowhere with hearing the confirmation. "Of course Dean. You always have been. Why?"

"W-well," I stammered, my emotions throwing a wrench in saying the words I wanted to get out next. "This probably sounds crazy, but I-I've been thinking, and I've realized some things, Cas."

He furrowed a brow as I tried turning on my side, wincing in pain, realizing that I had a broken leg and a shit ton of wounds. "What have you been thinking, Dean?"

"You're one of the things I want now and forever, Cas." I said hastily, wanting to get the words out before I lost all my goddamn nerve. "I-I...I don't really know what I'm trying to get at here honestly," then, just like someone turned off a light switch, my nerve drained when he only looked at me, blue eyes cold in shock. "And I don't know where we're going or what the future holds for any of us, but I...I just..." I took a breath before starting over. "I just...had to tell you that I guess..."

He didn't say anything, his face completely stoic and unreadable, causing hysteria to rise inside me.

Son of a bitch...I'd gone too far, I've just fucked all this up...Great job Dean...

But then he spoke, his voice soft and careful, like he was trying to tell me something in code.

"Dean," he started slowly. "Have you ever heard of breaking the jar with someone?"

I quirked a brow at him. "Breaking the what?"

"The jar," Castiel said again, shifting in his chair somewhat closer to me, staring at my hand, which he held in his own with a pensive gaze. "It's an ancient ritual of..." he paused, seeming to debate something before smiling to himself as he continued, "binding in Egyptian culture. All that is needed - other than the jar of course - is the consent from the two parties."

I thought over what he was saying, chuckling slightly to myself as I realized just what he was saying.

"You're serious?"
He smiled, staring out of the hospital room window, his face painted in pastel light from the rising
sun, and he was beautiful. Ethereal, even. I could see the dust dancing in the beams of light, the tiny
brown bits of hair on his head that stuck up in odd places, and the wrinkles on his gray hoodie and
jeans, making it appear as if he'd slept in them. So utterly normal, and perfect. And I loved him.

"I've never been more serious about something." He said easily, his gaze upon me so loving just
then, I had to look away.

"Well," I looked around the room, sighing to myself to not see a single jar in sight. "Looks like we're
fresh out of jars."

"When we get home then," he said, resting his cheek against my hand again. "When you're well, we
will do it. If you want."

"Yes," I answered without hesitation, mirroring the smiling he was giving me, back at him. "But you
know...I don't want it to be...you know...a huge deal or anything...Not that I don't want anyone to
know or anything, but-"

"You're right," he answered simply, still gazing at me so lovingly, I felt as if I was melting. "Our
lives are much too dangerous for that. Never mind."

I knew by the way he was smiling at me, he'd really said: "We will keep it a secret. Never mind what
the world does, because we have our own."

"Yeah," I chuckled weakly, looking forward to what lay ahead. "You're right. We're just a couple'a
dumbasses, huh?"

He snorted a little laugh that make me fall even more than I already had. I could feel the knot in my
throat from how hard I was trying to keep from weeping over the gratitude of having this moment.
Of having this chance to be falling in love with him and with life all over again.

"I prefer the word, optimistic," he mused with a warm smile. "Less dumb, less ass."

"You're right," I agreed, my smiling growing brighter as I saw my little family heading towards my
room through the window of my hospital room door, the group all pausing as Sam stopped to talk to
one of the doctors on the opposite end of the hallway. "Guess we have a lot to look forward to." I
nodded towards the door so Castiel would see Sam, Jazz, and Claire coming.

"Oh, Dean," Castiel said, leaning over and picking up something familiar off of the floor, an old
leather bound scrapbook. The one Rayne had given me so long ago...

"Hope you don't mind, but
Sam and Jazz added something to the scrapbook."

"They did?" I asked in confusion, wondering why it was here as I took it from Cas when he offered
it to me, a wide smile on his face. "What?"

"Look at the last page."

I flipped it over, flipping over a few pages before I got to the last one. On it, was a new aesthetic,
themed in cute little dates that Jazz and Sam had shared over the years, pictures of them together, and
little notes or trinkets from those times. It showed the build up, from the beginning of their
relationship, to now, the very last picture being Jazz holding her hand up to the camera as my brother
kissed her cheek, my mom's engagement ring on her finger.

A smile lifted up on my face, pure joy filling me so much, I felt fit to burst. I could not have asked for
anything to make me happier, and I suddenly knew that my best days, were just over the horizon.
"Well," I closed the scrapbook, handing it back to Cas. "Guess we'll have to add our own section to it then."

He quirked a smile, that subtle, barely-even-there one that I loved most. The door opened then, my little family spilling into the room with happy gasps and exclamations of "you're awake!" and "how do you feel!?" Still, underneath it all, I heard Castiel's reply to what I'd said, and it felt like the best promise I'd ever received.

"Yes, we should. And Dean, I can't wait to do that with you. Now, and forever."

Chapter End Notes

And there you have it, a true and proper ending! :D

Woo, can't believe I started writing this story way back in May of 2017! It's been a long and incredible journey since then, and in writing the beginning of this series way back in 2016. Sorry it took me so much longer to write this second book, life has been especially crazy for me these past few years... I also wanted this chapter to be great because this series deserved a well thought out ending, so I took my time with it. I have also been working on a book of my own original work to publish sometime this year, so I will post about it once that happens on here if any of you would like to read more of my work in the future! :)

On another note, I want to thank you all for having been here with me for the ride, especially if you've been here since the beginning. All your kudos and comments gave me the inspiration and motivation to keep going, so thanks to those of you that have left your love on my work! I hope this journey I've created with these amazing characters left you with the same sort of love I'll always have for them in a special part of my heart, and I thank you for having taken the time to enjoy this story. I hope in some way, it touched you in ways that bring a light to your heart. So, here's to all of us that love the things we do shamelessly. :)

Until the next journey, and much love,

- Destinee
Heya again everyone! :)  

Just wanted to let you guys know, that in the course of writing Falling, I ended up scrapping/redoing it quite a few times! I still have three "chapters" of bonus content left over from those redos, so I will be sharing this extra content over time! I thought it would be funny to share these "deleted scenes," and to show you guys how much different this story was going to be at one point!

I have already added the first chapter of this bonus content to my book, Supernatural Short Stories, if you wanna check it out! I have also added it to the Written in The Stars series I created to make it easier for you to find as well!

I'd also love to hear your guy's thoughts on me deciding to scrap those chapters! Do you think it was a good idea, or do you wish I had played out some of my original ideas? Let me know in the comments over there!

As always, thanks for your support, and until the next story! :)  

- Destinee

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!